

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

がらくた

Dancing Beast Night

《上》



電撃文庫



"Hello, friends! Thank you for once again taking an interest in this island.
Today I have a very simple tale to tell.
'Boy meets girl'!

A basic component of any story, no? The encounter of a murderer boy and a
mysterious girl who happens to be a self-proclaimed detective.
And the clumsy steps they dance together. That is today's story. Simple.

...But on whose strings are they dancing? The Witch of the West? Or the
Rogue of the East?

The two dogs who find themselves back at the island? The guard dog of the
volunteer police? The kitten of the Guard Team?

Or me, Spring-heeled Joplin? ...Or maybe even you.

After all, everyone who sets foot on this island has the right to make others
dance."

がらくた!

Dancing Beast Night ▶〈上〉

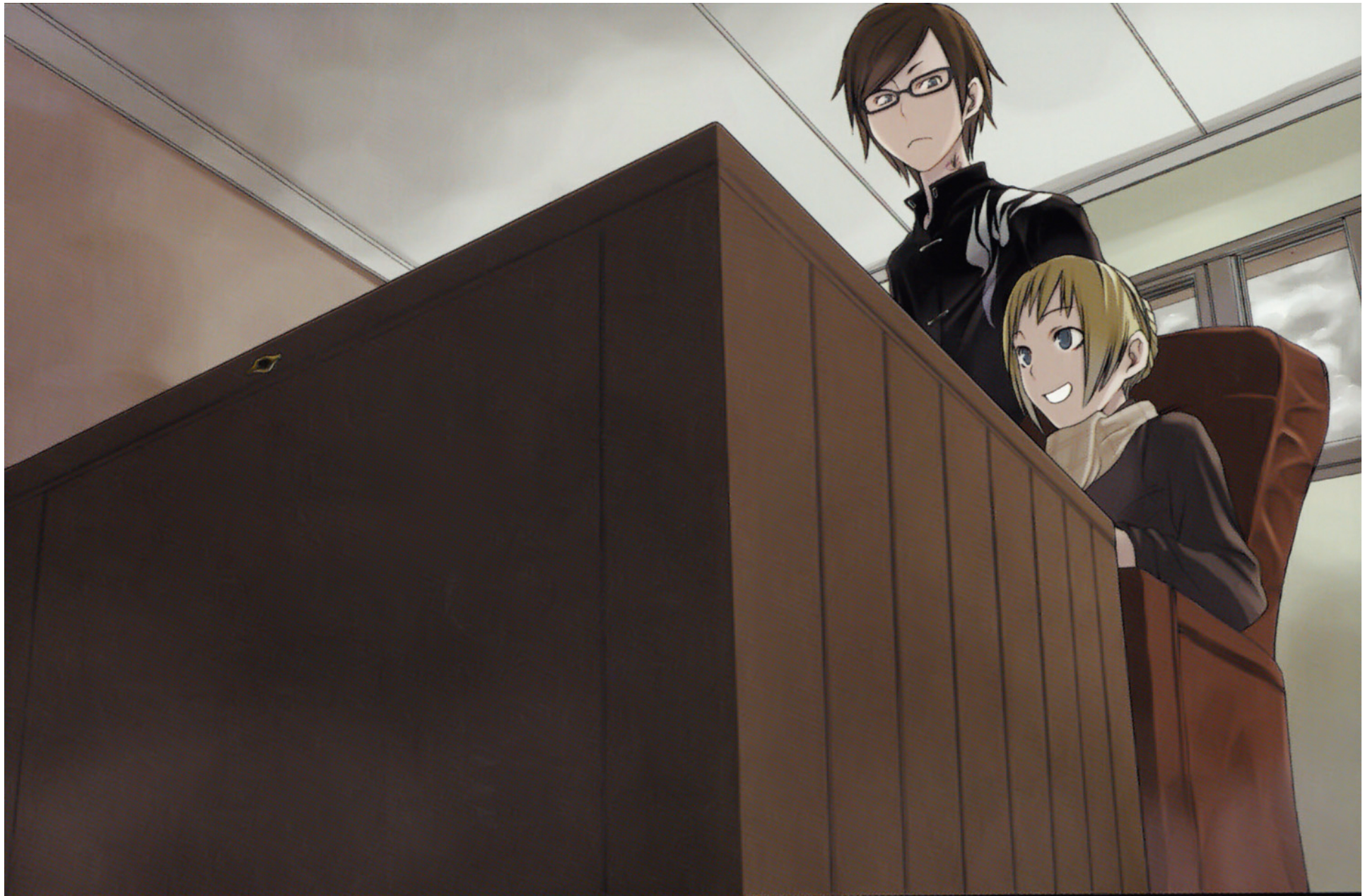
成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト

Illustration: Suzuhito Yasuda





Heehahahaha!

Geniuses! Normals! Idiots! Everyone doin' all right?

Though even prodigies aren't worth shit the moment they set foot on this island! Heehahaha!

Lemme get to the point here on today's 'Anything Airwaves'. The theme is, 'who would win if the Western and Eastern Districts had an all-out war?'.

Hmm...this question comes from a Mr. Spring-heeled Joplin, age unknown!

...What the hell is our island's very own urban legend trying to pull?! Ah well.

To give a personal analysis, I'd just let my bias speak for itself and give Kuzuhara of the Western District the gold medal here. But then all you listeners'd bring up the Eastern District's infamous killing murdering human human slaughterhouse, Yakumo Amagiri! Doesn't that sound like one hell of a show? It's worth slitting your mama's throat for tickets to a show that damned awesome! Heehehehe!

Even I can't tell who'd win in a fight. The odds are 0.00 in favor of neither!

It's clear as crystal—betting on either's a bad gamble. The banker would run off with the pot! Heehahaha! And let's be honest here. What would a human *human* slaughterhouse do against a dog, anyway? Not even our island's very own Holmes rip-off siblings could deduct this shit!

...Sorry for the exaggeration, folks. Our idiotic ripoffs couldn't even deduct the outcome of Mike Tyson vs. a grade schooler! Heehahahahaha!

Brother: Charlotte, do you think the DJ's talking about us?

Sister: Heh heh heh. That's an interesting deduction, Sherlock. But do you have the evidence to back up your claim?

Brother: No, but this is definitely about us. We have to face reality.

Sister: More importantly, Sherlock...

Brother: Hm?

Sister: Mike Tyson would be the favorite to win, from a normal perspective. But what if the grade schooler was an armed Shaolin-trained master? But *then* what if Mike Tyson had a nuke button at the ready? Hmm...a challenging conundrum! Heh heh heh...if we can figure out the winner, we can prove that we are not the idiot siblings the DJ is referring to!

Brother: Please figure out the fact that you're already an idiot for actually taking this deduction seriously...



East

Jokes aside, if East and West really went all out, you couldn't leave out the Guard Team. The boss of the Eastern District is a real rogue, no question about it!

Being a rogue means he's got lots of interests, which is how he managed to scrounge together a bunch of people obsessed with their *own* crazy interests... and that is your friendly neighborhood Guard Team! 'Friendly' if you're in the Eastern District, anyway.

Jun the chainsaw-wielding kitten! Zhang, champion of the underground wrestling ring! And watch out for Carlos—he's got guns hidden everywhere! There's Yen the number-freak, Mohawk Gorou the cleanup hitter, Marui the walking encyclopedia, Digitalis of the Sleeping Fist, Mr. Gen and his fourth-dimension armory, and Mii the happy drunk. Oh, and watch out for Lili the S&M lady—she's a mother of two!

Also worth keeping an eye out for is Nazuna Yukimura, who is crazy for the sword!

In other words, every man and woman on this team is missing a screw or 10! Is there no hoping for flowers like executives Yili and Lilei of the Western District here?

...Then again, Jun the captain is more than a match for Yili in a battle of hotness! She might look like a creepy shut-in, but no one can stop her once she's got something long in her hands! FYI, on hot nights, Jun. Sleeps. Topless!

Jun: 'H-hotness'? A-and how did she know that I sleep topless—

Carlos: Heh! Even with the voice distortion, Kelly's voice is the pinnacle of charm.

Zhang: Boss...shouldn't we do something 'bout this radio?

Gitarin: Nah. I think it's pretty interesting. So it's all right. As long as I approve, I believe this program should be allowed to continue! In fact, I demand that they start a new erotic programming block for the late-night hours!

Zhang: With a boss like this, I'm surprised our bigwigs are still holding the district together.

Gen: Hey, now it's even listing off our ages and hobbies.

Zhang: ...Hey, boss. This is breach of privacy or something. You sure we shouldn't stop them?

Gitarin: It's not a problem.

Carlos: Why not?

Gitarin: What is there to hide at this point? Kelly's informant in this case happens to be none other than myself—grk!

Jun: Mr. Gen, no! You can't pull a Neck Hanging Tree on the boss!

Nazuna: Then should I just cut him down?

Jun: No! You can't do that, either!



West

And as for the Western District...frankly, the volunteer cops are shit without Kuzuhara!

But that doesn't mean the Western District should cry themselves to sleep every night! They've got their trusty executives on their side—the villains of the round table!

You people only know 'bout Yili cause she's the face. Which makes sense. I mean, just look at her! She's beautiful! Sexy, even! Doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, people drool over her like dogs! Hell yeah! Approved!

But that doesn't mean the Western District is easy to approach! About the only exec you can get friendly with is Taifei, their intel guy! His belly ain't the only thing round about him—he's got a rounded personality to match!

Then you have prickly execs like Lihuang, an overseer! He looks like the kinda guy who'd murder you just for breathing his air, so watch out! Unlike his sister Yili, he's not going to bother trying to sound nice!

His other little sister, Lilei, is more of a dark beauty. Ever seen an expressionless girl with huge-ass tits cuddling some of the Rats? Surprise, surprise! She's actually an exec! A creepy but *adorable* and thrifty part of the organization! This is the definition of creepy-cute! I like it! And then there's—

Yili: The face, am I? I suppose that impression makes things easier for me.

Taifei: Don't worry about it. *Chomp* The DJ probably knows how dangerous you can be. Man, this mochi is really good.

Lihuang: How does a simple radio station know our names? Why do you not eliminate this nuisance, Yili?

Yili: There's no need to waste time and resources eliminating something that isn't even a threat.

Lihuang: Making excuses for your incompetence?

Yili: Oh? Managing the island is *your* job. Blaming others for your *own* incompetence now, are we?

Lihuang: How dare you—

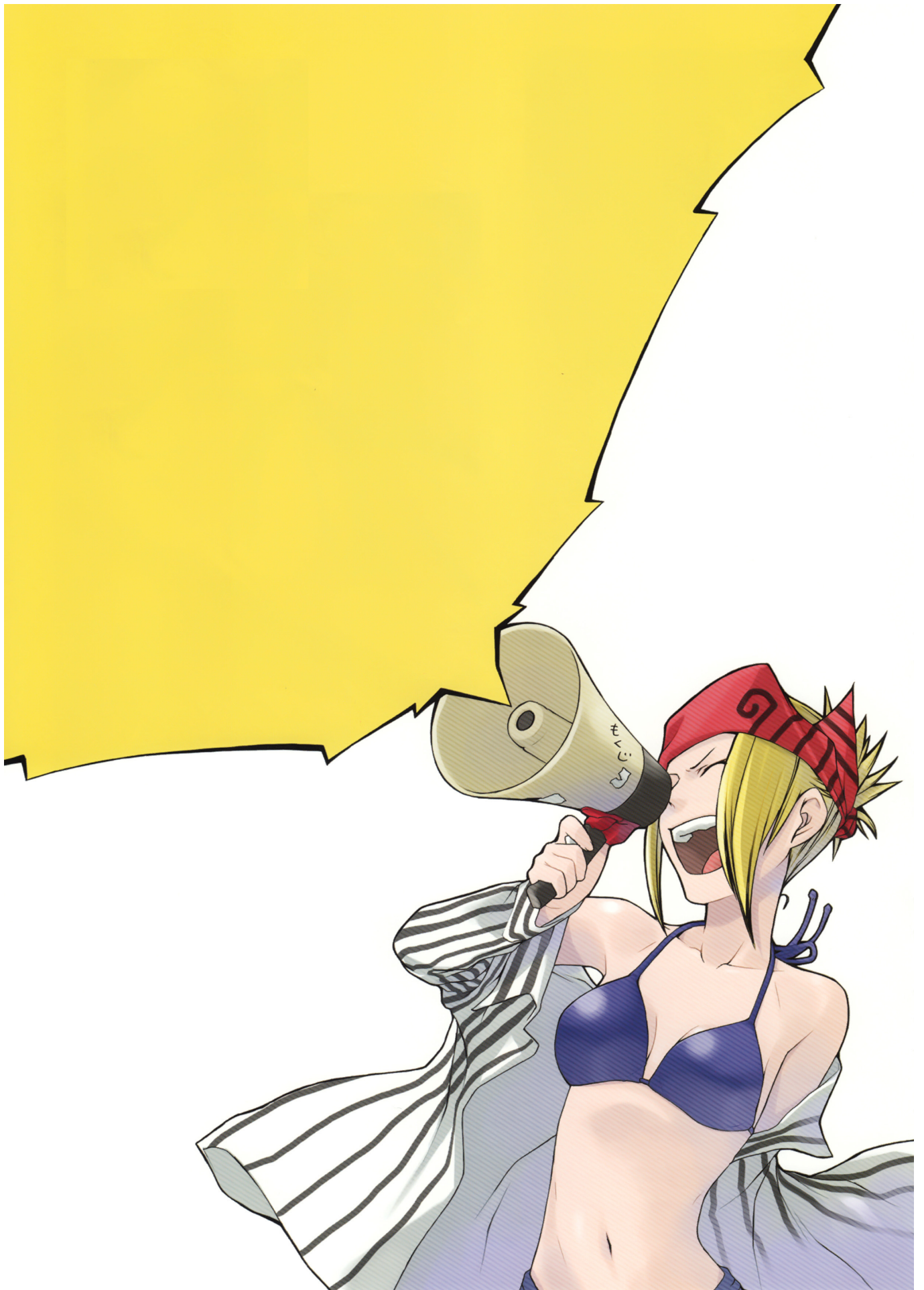
Taifei: *Munch* Managing and controlling information is my job—so let's just say this leak is my fault and stop arguing... *munch*

Lihuang: Tch! ...Lilei! What of you? You would not normally hesitate to erase fools like her.

Lilei: ...Adorable. It said. So it is okay.

Lihuang: I don't believe this... You lot lack nothing for matching the madmen of the Eastern District!

Yili: That's almost an honor.



雨霧八雲

島内最悪の殺人鬼と噂される男。口癖は『俺は、まともだ』。



テ

シャーロット

探偵気取りの米英ハーフ。ドジ少女。



コ

シャーロック

シャーロットの弟。皮肉屋。



ー

砂原潤

東区画の組織に属する『護衛部隊』のリーダー。



ー

葛原宗司

西区画の自警団長である、元警察官。島の番犬。



ー

ケリー

島の情報源である海賊放送『ぶるぶる電波』のオーナーである女性。



テ

ギータルリン

東区画を仕切る組織のボス。通称、暇人魔神。



ー

イーリー

西区画を仕切る組織の幹部。中国人と英国人のハーフ。



テ

夕海

父が設計した人工島の中で、地図を造ろうという目的を持った少女。



ー

ネジロ

人工島で育った子供達のギャング『ラッツ』。そのリーダーである少年。



カ

戌井隼人

元山賊にして現在海賊の青年。かつて人工島の最下層の中心だった狂犬。



バネ足ジョップリン 島内の『都市伝説』。



Dramatic Personae

Yakumo Amagiri: The man rumored to be the island's most atrocious killer. His catchphrase is "I'm normal".

Charlotte: A clumsy half-American half-British girl who's all about detective work.

Sherlock: Charlotte's younger brother. Sardonic.

Jun Sahara: The captain of the Eastern District's Guard Team.

Souji Kuzuhara: A former police officer, and captain of the Western District's volunteer police force. The island's guard dog.

Kelly: An informer and the producer of Buruburu Airwaves, a pirate radio station.

Gitarin: The boss of the organization that controls the Eastern District. Also known as the Demonic Rogue.

Yili: An executive of the organization that controls the Western District. Half-Chinese and half-British.

Yua: A girl with the goal of creating a map of the artificial island her father helped to design.

Nejiro: The leader of the Rats, a group of children who grew up on the artificial island.

Hayato Inui: A former bandit, currently a pirate. The mad dog who was once at the center of the Pits.

Seiichi Kugi: A young man who has given up on everything. Previously Yili's right-hand hunting dog.

Spring-heeled Joplin: The island's urban legend.

It occurred to me that the sky was blue.

That was why I killed people.

That was reason enough on this island.

Actually, you didn't *really* need a reason. But I'm not strong enough to kill people for no reason at all.

The reason was always different, but I started to get sick of repeating them to myself all the time.

And eventually, when I killed people, I found myself thinking stuff like,

'Because the sky is blue'. 'Because it's raining'. 'Because it's nighttime'.

Because I'm on this island.

That was why I killed people.

I killed them. I killed them. I killed them.

That's right. What I really wanted to tell myself wasn't the *reason* I killed.

I just want to remind myself that I killed people. So I would never look away. So I would face my own wrongdoings. That's why I faced that nauseating truth endlessly, again and again and again and again!

And eventually, that nausea turned to pleasure.

To remind me of myself—no, for simple peace of mind. For entertainment—

I will kill people again today.

And if I'm still clearly aware of all that, I...I must still be normal.

What a relief. It looks like I haven't gone crazy yet.



序 章

Prologue A: Wolf in Hollow Clothing

An endless blue sky holds the world in a gentle embrace.

The scent of the ocean filters between the mounds of abandoned rubble, filling my nostrils.

It is a peaceful time.

It is a peaceful place.

At least, that's what the sky is trying to convince me.

But when I look down, the tranquility of the sky crumbles and gives way to an infinitely drab daily life.

Drab buildings.

Drab streets.

Drab earth.

Drab air.

Drab noises.

Drab vibrations.

The drab temperature clings to my skin.

It's clearly winter, but I'm boiling hot. This must be what they call a heat island. I only know the name of the term, not the definition, but it sounds just about right...in fact, it's a pretty literal term.

The refreshing ocean scent instantly turns into the acrid odor of filth.

I understand that this is just a matter of subjectivity, but when I looked at the piles of trash lying before me, my mechanical judgement went out the window.

But maybe if I tried...

If I kill my emotions and coldly, deliberately, and geometrically chase away the smell, maybe my nose will be able to immerse itself in the ocean scent again—even if my eyes fall on the heaps of garbage.

No. Wait. Now that I think about it, I don't like the scent of the ocean, either. That was a close one. It's definitely abnormal to do something you don't like without a good reason.

Ah, what a relief.

I...I'm still normal.

When I feel relief, I feel sleepy. I look up at the sky again and decide to calm myself by basking in the pleasant breeze.

But that comfort is shattered by a desperate female voice.

"...That's enough, Mr. Amagiri. Please...please let Misaki go."

Who's calling my name?

I force my sleepy eyes from the blue sky and put them into focus, bringing the woman into view. A strange girl with short hair that covers her eyes, wearing a black leather suit jacket over a thin T-shirt.

Ah...Jun. That's right. I remember. This is Jun Sahara.

The captain of the Eastern District's Guard Team. A dangerous kitten who wields a chainsaw in each hand.

She looks young for her age, but she's got a surprisingly sensual figure. But in her hands are weapons that clash with that image. Fingering the triggers of her chainsaws, she glares at me.

Her bangs cover her face, but she could look very attractive if she made the effort. If only she'd have more confidence in her looks.

...Right. I can still get distracted by girls. I'm still okay; I'm still capable of thinking about other people.

I...I'm normal.

"Mr. Yakumo Amagiri... Please. Please, let Misaki go."

Oh, it looks like she remembers my full name, too. It's nice to see that a girl you barely know remembers your name.

And thanks to her words, I finally remember that I am holding another girl in my arms.

I *thought* my arms were getting a little tired. No wonder. But this girl is on the lighter side. Maybe she's a bit malnourished—then again, who on this island isn't?

I become a little worried.

Is she going to be all right? I didn't mean to, but I ended up dragging her around.

It feels like this must be the third time I've taken this girl hostage to escape.

Or is this the fourth time?



I look at the unconscious girl in the dealer's uniform and slowly fall into thought.

I replay my long memories from the moment I took her hostage for the first time.

...Right. This is the *fourth* time. I remember clearly.

What a relief. It looks like my memory is still working right.

Relieved for myself, I choose words to bring relief to the girl before my eyes.

"Hey...you can relax. I don't think this is the first time we've had this conversation, but I don't want to hurt this girl. I'm going to let her go in one piece once you Guard Team members are off my tail."

"I can't trust you, Mr. Amagiri," she replies, much more tense than her expression hints. She focuses her every nerve at me. This isn't good. If someone else was after her, they'd choose this moment...BANG! And it'd be over.

Without an inkling of how worried I am for her, Jun stares quietly and continues.

"After all...you're the Killer Ghoul."

The opening lasts a moment.

But a moment is just that. A moment. Before even a breeze could pass I reply calmly.

"I am the Killer Ghoul. I admit it."

I admit to being a killer, but I have not gone crazy.

As long as I'm on this island, I'm normal.

...Because here, not even the moniker 'killer' makes me insane.

I think I've gotten myself on her bad side.

Why? I only killed five people today.

Prologue B: Enter the Great Louse Detective

In the beginning, the island was created.

And the moment the island was connected to land by the bridge, it was abandoned without notice.

The hapless artificial island had been built and suddenly abandoned on the ocean.

But though it was abandoned by society, it was not abandoned by people. Or perhaps things had come to this because it had indeed been completely abandoned.

And to that incomplete island flocked people who had given up on everything, crossing the world's longest—but also incomplete—bridge. And just as a gathering of the laziest ants in a colony still produced hardworking ants that completed a community, the people who gathered and were abandoned quickly created a working society. And in the repetition of order and chaos in that lawless world, the island came to be called Japan's very own Kowloon Walled City.

To those outside the island, it was known as hell on earth, or perhaps a garbage dump—and among the more eccentric, it was called a paradise. But —

The residents of the island lived nothing more or less than completely ordinary lives.



Aboveground. The detective agency 'Private Eye Lizard'.

"...which is how the island is divided into three levels. The aboveground, the underground, and the Pits. All areas except for the Pits are controlled by people of the criminal underworld, divided between East and West. The Pits are part of the Western District in theory, but there's not much in the way of control down there and it has essentially been abandoned!"

A still-youthful voice filled the room, which was about half the size of a convenience store.

"Those who control the area from above are far beyond our reach, so we commoners have no need to stick our noses into their business. What concerns us, then, are the rank-and-file peacekeepers. The Western District's volunteer police and the Eastern District's Guard Team!"

"I see..." the client sighed, discreetly taking in his surroundings.

Before the one window was an old wooden desk and a leather armchair. In front of them was a sofa for clients and a glass coffee table, complete with ashtray.

"More importantly...I had no idea that private investigators still worked in offices like this," said the client, looking around. The room was furnished like the set of a detective drama.

The young woman by the desk ignored the man and delved even further into her description of the island.

"Looking upward on this island is meaningless! After all, those on the top were *born* to be the rulers. We common folk can do little more than wonder how much of our prison yard we can utilize. Heh heh heh. A tragic story indeed. And it is in that tiny prison that we detectives living on the edge spy on others!"

"I see."

The caucasian woman—who, to a Japanese person, looked more mature than she actually was, and perhaps should be called a girl—became more and more excitable. The client found himself giving absent answers.

"Now, my office may be on the edge, but location matters not to a detective's talent! I ask that you trust Charlotte Liverpool with the juicy details of your request!"

In any given setting there were characters who clashed with the world around them. The island was no exception.

The decor of the agency and the sign at the entrance were among such characters.

A chubby lizard that resembled a *tsuchinoko*¹ with adorable round eyes was drawn on the sign, a poor fit for the artificial island the girl was describing. Then again, the agency itself—a forcibly renovated hotel room—was no better a match for the world around it.

In fact, the existence of a private eye on a lawless island was an oxymoron in and of itself. Further, the girl giving the explanations—Charlotte Liverpool—seemed completely removed from the profession of ‘detective’.

“Please, call me Lottie. Names are nothing more than symbols, anyway. Heh heh heh...”

“...Of...of course.”

Though growing skeptical at Charlotte’s faux-world-weary words, the client reminded himself that one should not judge a book by its cover and walked over to the girl, who now stood by the window.

“Then let me get into the details—” he began, trying simply to get her attention—

“HAH!”

Charlotte let out a battle cry and dodged an invisible attack, landing a strike on the man.

There was a dull noise as her wrist dug into the man’s shoulder. With incredible force, her thin wrist was thrown against his firm body.

“...Ow.”

Wrapping her wrist in her other hand, the girl squatted with tears in her eyes.

“P-please don’t...stand behind me...”

“Are you all right?” The client asked and held out his hand, not even realizing that he had been attacked.

¹ A snake-like cryptid from Japan.

"Heh heh...heh...I'm afraid I don't make a habit of shaking hands with my clients. A pro never offers his own right hand."

"I get the feeling I've read that line in a manga somewhere. But I'm not sure how seriously to take that claim, with your hand completely swollen."

"...Heh heh. You're got a sharp eye, sir. But this is no place for amateurs—one wrong move, and you might get burned. That is the way of us butterflies of night," Charlotte replied.

The client hesitated, but eventually decided to point out the obvious.

"Ahem...perhaps you have detectives confused with hostesses?"

A moment of silence followed.

"...That's an interesting deduction! Maybe you should take up writing!" Charlotte said, finally breaking the silence, and stood. It was an embarrassing situation from any perspective, but she seemed to think she had explained herself fully with her response.

The man who was visiting as her client began to wonder if he had stepped into the wrong office, but his worries were quickly drowned out by the voice that came from behind him.

"...If you can't offer your right hand because it's your dominant one, just give him your left."

There stood a tall, bespectacled boy. There was no emotion on his face, and his clothes were mostly black. There were faint highlights in his hair and a tattoo on his pale neck, like he was part of a visual rock group.

"Please, Sherlock Liverpool! No more inelegant wordplay!"

"Please stop calling your own younger brother by his full name, Charlotte. It's embarrassing."

The newcomer was not Japanese either, but he spoke the language with just as much fluency as Charlotte. And if he was using Japanese to speak to his own family, it must be their native language. Which was nothing unusual in Japan, but watching a pair who belonged more in a Hollywood film speaking in fluent Japanese was almost like watching a dubbed movie.

With that impression stuck in his mind, the client cleared his throat and explained himself.

"Ahem...I've been told that you were one of the few detective agencies on this island I could trust," he began hesitantly. Charlotte preened.

"Heh heh...I'm afraid that's a dubious claim at best. On this island, 'trust' only serves as a ball and chain—"

"'Trust' in this case only means that we do not take your money and run. Our success rate is only 40%."

"Sh-Sherlock Liverpool!"

Sherlock was raining on his sister's parade. The client began to wonder if the brother's incredible name was actually quite common overseas, and brought the conversation back on track.

"I would like to discuss my request...may I continue?"

"Oh, yes! Yes! Excuse me." Charlotte cleared her throat, turning to her client.

The man was about 30 years old, his suit and nondescript face making it clear that he was not from the island.

When people like him came to the detective agency, they usually fell into one of two groups.

One group was made up of journalists or reporters asking to be guided around the island for a story. The other group was made up of those searching for people who had come to the island.

The client this time belonged to the latter category.

"I'd like you to find someone and keep an eye out on him."

"You want us to watch someone?"

Rather than reply, the man opened the suitcase next to him and produced a single photograph.

The photo, presumably printed on a piece of ordinary printer paper, featured a young man smiling sweetly at the camera.

"The person in this picture?"

Charlotte scrutinized the photo. Sherlock, who indifferently brought them coffee, glanced over his sister's shoulder.

The boy in the picture had incredibly innocent eyes. He was about 15 or 16 years old, and would not look out of place in a school uniform.

"Yes. His name is Takehito Isegawa. The photo is a little outdated, and he should now be about five years older. Actually, we hired a private eye for this case earlier and received word that the boy supposedly came to this island about four years ago, but afterwards the detective suddenly disappeared."

Charlotte nodded along.

People went missing all the time on the island, but if the detective had chased after the boy without even preparing, he was probably no longer of this world.

"Then we can't even be certain that the boy is alive."

"True. But we are prepared for that outcome. I understand that this may be a faux pas, but we've also hired many other private eyes as well. I do not mind in the least that the boy finds out he is being watched; our priority is simply to *find* him."

Charlotte was not particularly upset that she was sharing a request with other detectives—although most of them were probably mainlanders. She was happy as long as she got her pay. She was also not suspicious in the least because nothing like this had ever happened before.

What concerned her was something about the photograph.

"Umm...this boy in the picture. Is his perhaps your son, or judging from his age...your brother?"

"No. He's the son of someone I am indebted to, and...well, I'd prefer if you didn't ask questions about his family."

Charlotte seemed to be just fine with that, but Sherlock placed a cup of coffee on the table and asked anyway.

"Why now, after five years?"

Charlotte smacked herself, having missed the obvious, and a hint of doubt slid off the client's face. But put at ease by the sharper-looking half of the detective team, he discreetly answered his question.

"I can't explain the details, but...something significant has happened with his family. I hope that will be enough to satisfy you."

The siblings were silent for a time at the unusual answer, but Charlotte eventually put on an understanding smile.

"...Of course. Everyone has pasts and wounds they want to cover up."

"Except you, Charlotte."

Ignoring her brother's jab, Charlotte continued.

"Heh heh heh...so, supposing I find the boy safe and sound, how long must I work as his personal prison guard?" She asked with a haughty sip of coffee.

"This is just an investigation, so I can't give you any concrete timelines. But...up to half a year."

Pfft.

Charlotte spewed her coffee at the client.

"Whoa!"

The client leapt behind the sofa to avoid the scalding barrage. He managed to avoid getting any coffee on his clothes, but the sofa and the table were dotted with black—but before he knew it, Sherlock had already wiped off the droplets and things had returned to normal.

"E-excuse me. But *half a year*? Maybe with enough pay, yes, but I'm afraid we have other cases to take on..."

Charlotte tried to back out of the lengthy job, making excuses.

But the man would not give up. He placed a hefty envelope before the detective.

"500,000 yen as down payment. And an additional 100,000 per week."

"Leave it to us."

After a detailed explanation of the terms, the girl sent off the client and suddenly broke into laughter.

"Heh heh heh...ahahahaha!"

"Looks like my sister's finally lost her mind."

"...You didn't have to make that sound so serious, Sherlock Liverpool! This is our first job in half a year—you should be happy! Now we can finally say goodbye to cheap-o liquor!"

"But you can't even finish a glass of beer," Sherlock pointed out. His sister looked away pouting.

"It's a matter of atmosphere!"

"I bet you've been watching those old detective flicks again. That spit take with the coffee was a Yusaku Matsuda if I've ever seen one."

"A-anyway! He said that he'd top off our pay with another 1 million yen if we find the target. We can't lose to the other detectives!"

Watching his sister clench her fists, Sherlock sighed and shook his head.

"...Did it ever occur to you that other detectives and investigators are different from us? They're professionals."

"That's not a problem at all. We live on this island; therefore the advantage is ours."

"...Charlotte. Please don't forget where we are. We live on the surface of the surface—the safest part of the island. We barely ever head down underground, and we've never even been to the Pits. Do you know how hard it was for me to find us a place with a proper lock on the door?" Sherlock said without so much as inhaling, but his tone quickly took a turn for the

considerate. "Besides...forget thugs or criminals. Underground we could run into Yakumo Amagiri or Spring-heeled Joplin."

"Ahaha! They're just urban legends."

Yakumo Amagiri and Spring-heeled Joplin.

They were local legends known to every resident of the artificial island.

First, Yakumo Amagiri.

He was an infamous mass murder known as the Killer Ghoul. Supposedly he had killed more people than he had eaten meals. Eyewitness accounts pegged him as everything from a little girl in gothic lolita wear to a giant over two meters tall. Equally mysterious was the reason for his killings.

In other words, though many knew his name, not even half the island knew if he existed at all.

As for Spring-heeled Joplin, his name was all people knew. No one had any insight into the kind of person he was. Mostly, people would blame mysterious or unexplainable incidents on him—"blame it on Joplin", they would say, as though referring to fairies or imps.

Charlotte was one of those who believed that both were merely urban legends.

"Listen closely, Sherlock Liverpool. On this island, murder is mundane. People are only using these fictional killers to vent their fears of the *real* unknown murderers among us! Heh heh heh. You would have known this from the start if you'd moved past watching and stepped into deduc- um... wait. Moved past deduction and stepped into observation? ...Moved past observation and into arrest...?"

"All right, all right. Let's just say we'll have all the answers once we make an arrest and interrogate the culprit."

As Sherlock raised his arms with a sigh, Charlotte felt a twinge of doubt—but her mind was already hard at work calculating their pay as she stood for her goal of money.

"Then let's be off! ...Huh? Sherlock Liverpool, where's my trenchcoat?"

"I used it to wipe the coffee off the sofa."

"Whaaaaaaat?"

The detective was on the move.

Without an inkling of the peril she threw herself into, as though her lack of insight was her greatest weapon, she ran forward.

If she had moved past watching and stepped into observation, she might have noticed something.

That she was already walking on someone's strings.

She was not the only one.

The others who received the same request.

The boy in the photograph.

Everyone on the island.

And the island itself.

Each and every one was dancing for a malicious puppeteer, spinning dangerously close to destruction.

All sorts of people gathered on the island.

With their varied thoughts and ideas,

Some danced,

Some were made to dance,

And some made others dance.

It was not a phenomenon unique to the island, but on this island such unsightly dances stood out even more.

...Or perhaps observing the ups and downs of others was the very best entertainment the islanders could seek.

The murderer boy who believed himself normal was a special existence.

On this island full of colorful characters, he lived as a weapon exuding a particularly dense air of madness—living only to kill.

Murder was nothing to blink at on the island, but there was still a sense of order in the community. Yet he defied that order and remained fixated on his goals—to the point of turning the world against himself.

Even the dog with rainbow-colored hair that made its den in the Pits had feared the mad wolf. Though now a legend whose very existence was in doubt, the wolf continued to live with only his own sensations as company.

He was simply someone who could neither love nor hate himself. In a way, he was the most quintessential of locals.

The girl who admired hardboiled detectives was one of the common folk.

On this island full of colorful characters, she had no real connections to the heavyweights, no special abilities, and no courage to allow her to step into danger.

Detectives were a rarity on the island, but there were countless rarer jobs to be heard of. She was neither on the edge nor in the center of the island.

Charlotte Liverpool lived a quiet life amidst that community.

She was simply someone who spent her free time listening to the Buruburu Airwaves broadcasts. A common person like any other.

That was why, on this island, he danced.

Not knowing that he was dancing of his own free will.

That was why, on this island, she danced.

Knowing that she was being helplessly pulled along on strings by an unreachable puppeteer.

Well, friends.

Let us resume our observation.

間奏1

『犬も歩けば不幸にあたる』



Interlude 1: Every Dog has his Unlucky Day

In the dark, he ran without pausing for breath.

All he could see beyond the rainbow-colored veil over his eyes—his own bangs—was a murky grey darkness.

He had no idea which passage he was running through.

“Fuck... Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! This is some messed-up crap—oh *fuck!*”

He ran.

He ran.

He ran.

He began to wonder if his feet were even pounding against the floor.

It felt like he was running across a bottomless bog, or through a particularly dense mist. But his every sensation was warning him: the creature at his back was after his life.

“What the hell? What the hell is he?! Shit shit shit this is some crazy shit like hell I’ve got time to talk!”

It was a different sort of fear from anything he’d felt before.

The terror of being held at gunpoint by a cop. The terror of being immobile in the jungle. The terror of shuddering under the blankets as a child at the thought of death.

Different even from the terror of shooting his own parents to death.

An unknowable terror was gaining on him, fast. Certain death, certain pain; such things did not scare him. After all, in a sense, he desired his own death.

And yet he was afraid.

Pursuing him was a being that transcended the limits of his expression, like death or pain. The unknown had become terror incarnate, bent on chasing him down.

'I won't make it.'

'I won't make it.'

And yet he pressed forward, with no choice but to run.

Then, he saw a flash of light.

Was it a window?

The man with rainbow-colored hair did not even look to see if the window was open as he launched himself off the floor.

Sensing someone's hand narrowly brush against his back in a failed grab, he crashed loudly against the glass.

Blue skies, blue seas. Without even the time to note where the horizon lay—

The man tumbled toward the waves.

There was an impact.

Followed by pain.

And the splash of water.

Then, he opened his eyes.

The blue sky and the white clouds warmly welcomed his awakening. But the wind was icy-cold, driving the man to wonder how he had fallen asleep in such a place.

"You looked like you were havin' a nightmare or something, boss. You cool?"

The first person to come into sight was a man in messy work wear.

The man jokingly referred to as 'boss' realized that he was still alive, and looked around to orient himself.

Blue.

He was surrounded by endless blue.

In the middle of the sea, far from any visible land, the boat chugged away from the sun amidst the white waves.

Under the sunlight's embrace, the rainbow-haired man sprang up.

To see that his feet were truly steady against the solid deck.

To see that he had indeed escaped the terror of that moment.

"...Whereabouts are we, Mr. Ara?"

"We just set off, boss. We still got about a week."

"Right."

Mr. Ara, a man of ambiguous ethnicity, breathed a sigh of relief and returned to the wheelhouse. The nightmare must have been a frightening one if he had come all the way onto the deck to see if things were all right.

'We only just set off, dammit. Talk about some freaky foreshadowing.'

The rainbow-haired man stretched and recalled the dream, as well as the nightmarish terror from his past.

The memory went back three years, to when he was still on the artificial island.

"Yeah. No way I coulda jumped out the window that time with Kuzuhara if I hadn't pulled that stunt before. Maybe I should thank the kid."

Though he was young himself, he called the terrifying creature in his dreams a child as well.

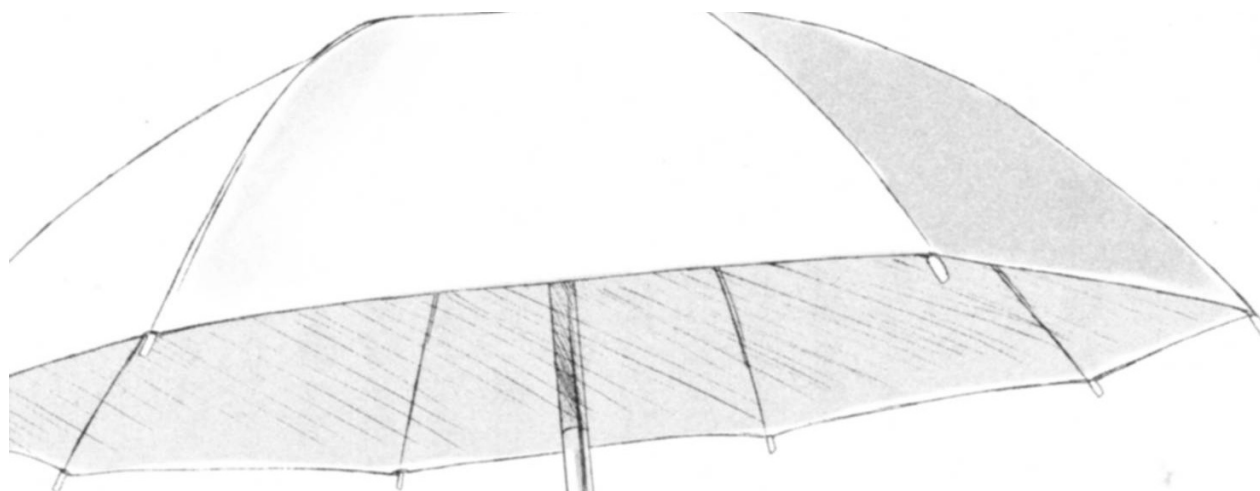
"...Then again, I don't think I ever wanna run into him again."

With that, he quietly looked up at the sky.

Countless faces he was about to see rose to his mind.

Wondering just how many of those faces were still alive, the rainbow-colored dog snickered.

On and on, Hayato Inui stared up into the sky.



一 章



Chapter 1-A: The Wolfman and the Sea

When was the first time I killed someone?

I wonder to myself, blankly sensing the wind on my skin.

It has to have been *after* I came to this island. That much is clear.

Even I'm not stupid enough to kill someone outside the island. I wouldn't *need* to kill anyone if I was out there.

I do nothing that is unnecessary. Especially if it involves brushes with the law.

Which is why the 'me' on the mainland who didn't kill people must have been a perfectly normal person. The murders on the news were strange and gruesome from my perspective, like they should be.

In the world where minors kill other minors, I once heard a commentator say—'Young people can't distinguish reality from fantasy' and began to wonder like a rebellious teenager, *'then why do adults kill more people when they're the ones who can tell reality and fantasy apart?'*

Then again, news commentators get paid to say stuff like that.

Still, the thought of killing people for money or revenge, or the thought of unsolved crimes makes a shiver run down my spine. It terrifies me.

Compared to people who commit such alien violence, I think I'm a very good and innocent human being.

I mean, I've never killed anyone.

Off this island, at least.

That's right.

On this island, I have no choice but to kill.

After all, if I'd never come here, I'd never have killed anyone.

I reaffirm this fact again today.

I reaffirmed it yesterday, and the day before, too.

I reaffirm the fact that my moniker—Killer Ghoul—is this island's fault, not mine. That alone brings peace to my heart.

I think I feel at peace with the conclusion because it's true.

"In other words, this island is the one you should be getting angry at, not me. What do you think?"

"You half-asleep, fruitcake?"

The large Asian man standing before me classifies my opinion as half-conscious sleep talk. How could he? My eyes are as clear as ever.

"Son of a bitch...do you even understand your position?" Asks the large man—I think his name was Zhang—with a glare.

My position... Oh. Right. It's very important to always understand your position.

I think people's lives really depend on how well they know their own position. But whether you take a passionate leap forward or come to a cool stop depends on who you are.

I focus on my vision, scanning the area to see where I stand.

A junkyard inside an island composed of garbage.

Normal islanders never came to this place, where only the truly worthless things were discarded—after all, if you're unlucky you might stumble onto real industrial waste...or so says the owner of my usual ramen place.

Yes. His ramen is incredible. It might be a good idea to steal the recipe and wander the country pulling along my very own ramen stand.

...Right. That's going on my list of life goals.

It's a little haphazard, but I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that having a vision for my own future makes me normal.

...Whoops. I almost got off-track.

I have to check my position.

To begin with the conclusion, I am in the midst of a commotion.

A group of people, clearly not a friendly bunch, are exuding an aura of hostility.

Men and women, ranging in age from their late teens to their fifties, are gathered as though surrounding me. Add to that all the broken lumber and fallen concrete, and it makes for a spectacular image.

Though they're an eclectic bunch, there's a sense of unity between them. It's no exaggeration to say that they are in control of the entire space.

Naturally, I'm on the side that is being controlled.

To be specific, this bunch is the Guard Team—part of the Eastern District, one of the groups that maintain order on the island.

Their leader is Jun Sahara. The girl with bangs who was in front of me until just earlier.

After the encounter, she caught me off-guard and snatched back the casino girl, then took off to safety. As though in exchange arrived this strange and terrifying group.

1. In other words,

2. I was in

3. A pickle.

All right...now I clearly understand my position.

I am calm. What a relief. It's a relief to know that I can stay calm even in a pickle like this.

"I think I'm in a pickle."

"..."

I just say what comes to mind, but Zhang doesn't seem satisfied with the answer. The creases in his brow deepen, and his glare intensifies.

At the same time, one of the Guard Team members lobs a knife at me, so I twist out of the way.

What a relief. I can still evade attacks.

If that knife had hit my carotid artery, my forehead, or my heart, I would have died.

But I am, at this moment, alive.

I continue to exercise my will.

It's so good to be alive.

And if I can still appreciate the light of life, I must be normal.

When I look forward, I note that Zhang looks like he had swallowed a bug because I dodged the knife.

I had twisted my body to the side, but my face is still looking at him.

After all, his power is what requires my attention most in this particular pickle.

Greatest Zhang—a brawler who happens to be champion of the underground wrestling ring, as well as the lieutenant of the Guard Team.

Coming from the Chinese mafia, he must be skilled with guns and knives as well—but he's not a pro wrestler for nothing. He prefers fighting hand-to-hand.

Supposedly he had stirred up trouble in his homeland and the mafia put a bounty on his head, forcing him to escape to Japan and this island.

A bounty?

That sounds terrifying. The mafia are already the symbol of lawlessness. But once you add stuff like bounties to their reputation...what in the world did this man pull to get himself a bounty?

I lose myself in thought, but Zhang takes my silence as conceit.

"Chill to the end, huh? You make me sick. ...The people you killed might have had *families*. Well? Ever think about that, you sick monster?"

"...I feel sorry for them. It makes me sad to think of the people left behind. I'm sure they would have lived much more peaceful lives if they'd never come to this island. ...This island really is awful."

I am being honest.

But the creases on Zhang's forehead only deepen.

As though words are no longer necessary, he glances at the other Guard Team members.

In an instant, their formation tightens.

I must have made him angry.

Oh. Now that they're closer, I'm starting to recognize their faces.

Wonderful. I'm feeling a little happy.

Ahead of me to the left is the Spaniard with blue shades. Carlos the gun maniac. He may always be smiling like an idiot, but his marksmanship is world-class. His full metal jackets rarely miss the mark.

I happen to be one of those marks he misses.

I'm not bragging. I'm just lucky.

Huh? Maybe that's bragging too, in a sense. This is a pickle. Maybe I'll ask the ramen shop owner later. He seems to have a lot of life experience.

Left of Carlos is a big man with a mohawk, and a middle-aged man wearing sunglasses. They were...hmm. I can't seem to remember their names. Setting my memory problem aside, I look at the other side.

A woman in bondage gear. She looks young, but I know for a fact that she has two children. I wonder how her husband is taking the fact that she's part of the Guard Team?

When I turn even further to cast a glance behind me—

There stands the reason I feel a little happy.

Short, shimmering black hair. A slender build and plain clothes.

In her clear eyes swirls the very same enmity that lay in the eyes of everyone else surrounding me.

Nazuna Yukimura. That's her name.

She is one of the few female members of the Guard Team.

She uses swords, knives, and spears to kill—oh wait, this is the Guard Team—to *protect* people. The katana at her side looms imposingly.

To be frank, she distracts me. It's not a crush yet...is what I'd like to say, but I can't say so with confidence. In any case, she is beautiful.

Who calls a girl 'beautiful' in this day and age, anyway?

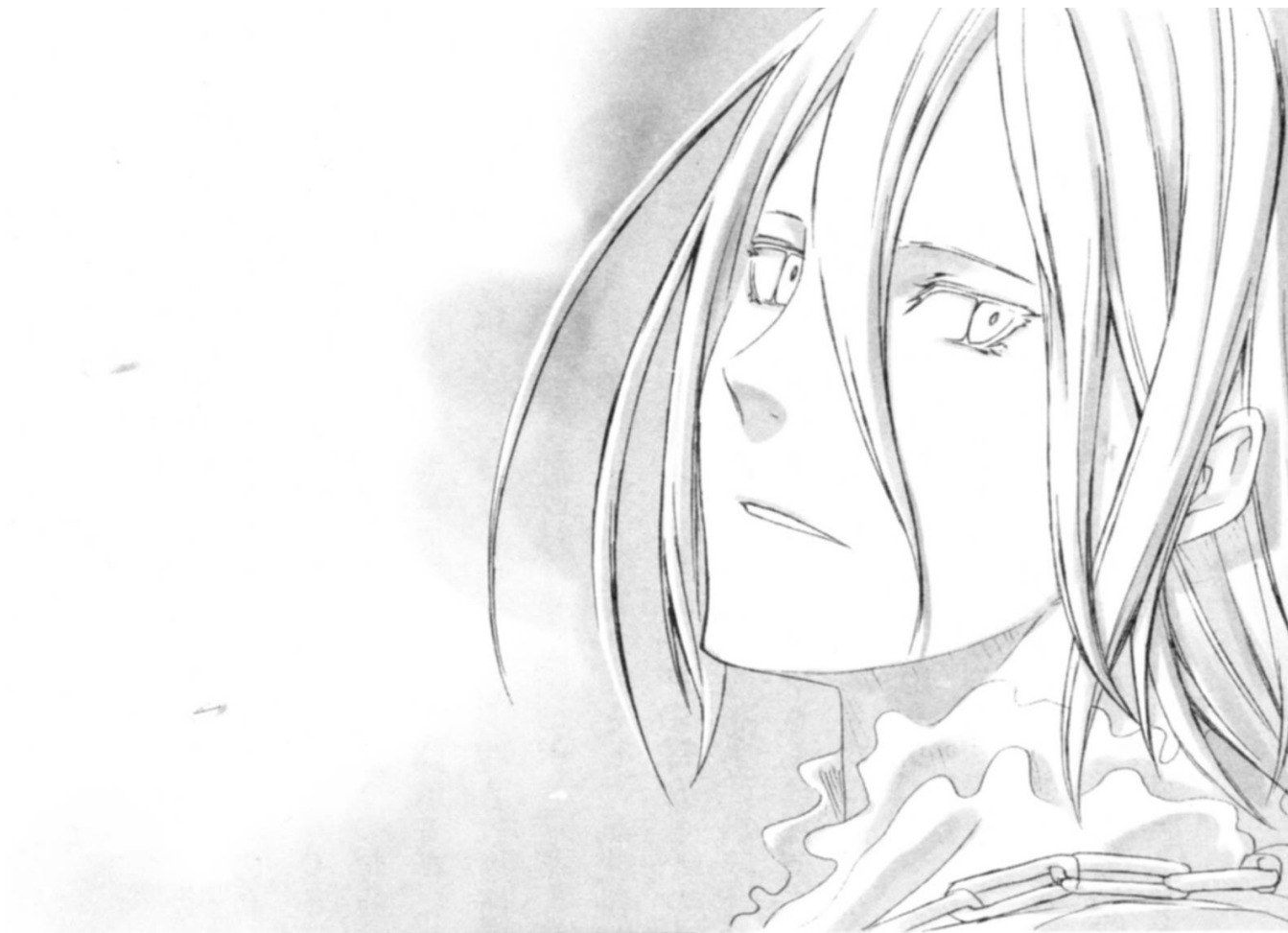
But that's the way I feel. Who cares if it's outdated? What's beautiful is beautiful.

As the Guard Team and I ran circles around one another over the course of countless chases (I think they've been ordered to capture me alive), I began to get good looks at each and every one of their members.

Eventually, I began to be distracted by one of the few female members of their group.

It's not love at first sight, but I didn't have a specific reason. She's on the pretty side, but I don't get hung up on appearances. And I have no time to get to know her personality, since we're on opposing sides. Maybe if we were alone, but there are too many people in the way here. But it's definitely true that I am distracted by her.

It's understandable, isn't it? You could explain why you love someone, but it's not easy to pinpoint why you *started* to love someone. Unless the meeting turned out like a stroke of fate, or something important happened to make you fall in love with them.



I look at her face with those thoughts in mind, and Miss Nazuna cautiously meets my gaze. I'm happy to look into her eyes, but it's a little embarrassing.

As I wonder whether to look away or not, the other members begin to whisper to her.

"Look out, Nazuna. He's got his eye on you."

"He's probably gonna try and kill you to break through."

This is a cruel and hurtful misunderstanding.

But if I want to correct them, I'd have to say the real reason I looked at her. That would be too embarrassing.

As I mentally flounder, she opens her mouth to speak.

"...Just try me," she says, dead serious.

...It might be a misunderstanding, but my heart still skips a beat when the girl I have an interest in suddenly says that to me.

Is it strange to think this way?

Am I abnormal?

But I think it's acceptable to be a little abnormal for love's sake. The moment I realize I'm acting abnormally, it's no longer abnormal.

Yes. I am not only normal, but calm.

I jump out of the way as she draws from a sitting stance, and escape her reach.

As if on cue, the shirtless man with long hair lobs a bowling ball at me. I dodge.

The moment I think I am safe, the man with the mohawk raises his baseball bat. How could he use a baseball bat as a weapon? I would love to inform him that the artisans did not carve out that bat so it could be used to harm people.

But it's certainly a fitting weapon for a common person to use.

I remember reading once that even in countries with high crime rates, where children know nothing about baseball, baseball bats sell as well as anywhere else.

Setting attacks aside, what about self-defense? I'm sure even the baseball bat artisans will be forgiving if you manage to save someone from punks with one of their works. In fact, they might even be proud.

Although I guess that depends on the artisan. And since I'm not a baseball bat artisan and I'm in no position to be critical, I decide to accept the mohawk man's choice of weapon.

...Wait. No. No. That was close. They almost had me.

The Guard Team is made up of the personal favorites of Gitarin, leader of the Eastern District. If they wanted, they could get their hands on the best weapons in the world.

...So why do they stick with things like bowling balls and baseball bats? Get serious. I almost want to ask them if they really know what it means to guard someone. ...W-wait, the katana is fine.

Which means there's nothing wrong with Miss Nazuna. Katanas are more helpful than guns in small spaces, and I've heard of a female assassin in the U.S. who fought with a katana in each hand. I'm sure she must have been as prim and proper as Miss Nazuna.

Of course, even that assassin couldn't possibly be a match for her.

Oh, I get it. It's because I keep using Miss Nazuna as an example for everything that I fall under the impression that I'm falling more for her.

Then again, a lie compressed a hundredfold is bound to become truth. So maybe I really am falling for her, little by little.

But it's not like that love will ever come to fruition, what with the vendetta she and her friends seem to have against me.

Maybe that forbidden love angle is just making me think about her more.

...At that moment, the tip of the baseball bat finally comes swinging down next to me.

That was close. Talk about a fast one. It probably took less than a second for him to raise that bat and swing it down. If he were swinging horizontally, he could probably make the Major Leagues.

"Slippery as ever, the little rat!" Zhang roars, but by then I am already dodging Carlos's shots and lunging at the ground.

With both hands on a mound of rubble, I use the momentum from the turn and raise my feet into the air to do a handstand. With my arms alone I push myself upwards and slide between the abandoned debris.

The gap is narrow, but I manage through it. I spot an opening along the way and kick up some of the junk at the mohawk man.

"Damn that pest!" Zhang yells, but a soft scream reaches my ears first.

"Ah..."

It's Miss Nazuna. It looks like she lost her balance because I toppled one of the mounds of rubble. And to make things even better, she's falling toward *me*. I had no idea she'd come so close. I didn't expect a sneak attack from her.

The fear of death...*was* on her face, but it quickly changes to determination. Is she trying for a suicide attack? Even as she falls, she reaches for the sword at her side.

But it's too late. She's completely within my reach—my hand will reach her before she draws.

And it all plays out as I expected.

As she falls from the rubble, I grab her hand and pull, stepping behind her to keep her arm behind her back and prevent her from drawing. Like a police officer from a cop drama.

If I twist just a little more, she would feel pain. So I weaken my grip just before that point.

Her arm is warmer than I expected. The wintry chill only emphasizes the heat and carries it over to me.

Oh no. My heart is starting to race.

It would be great if she falls for me because of this incident, but that sounds too much like wishful thinking so I should forget about it. ...But I can't help my heart racing.

I am normal. I am most definitely *not* thinking like a stalker.

But someone wants to interrupt my little moment of happiness.

"Son of a bitch...why don't you ever kill us? You don't even blink when you slaughter thugs on the street."

"Because I know," I reply without giving him time to continue. Zhang looks surprised. The others around him seem to be trying to catch me off-guard, but no one comes forward—they're worried about Miss Nazuna.

So I let myself relax and continue.

"Your bonds are powerful. They really are."

Zhang says nothing.

"So this is what I think. You know in movies and comic books, how when your friend dies, the rest of the team powers up? I think that's plausibly realistic. I guess I could try to *scare* you by killing a friend, but you people look like *nothing* would scare you, and if I did that, I'd really turn the Eastern District against me."

"You're already enough of an enemy as it is. And as for that little spiel about powering up...it ever cross your mind that we might just be punks who exist to get whipped by the protagonist?" Carlos said snidely. That doesn't make much sense.

"No. Between you people and a killer like me, I'm obviously the bad guy and you're the protagonists. So the bad guy kills all the good guys in one cut and comes the happy ending...? Is that what you'd like? Then again, it sounds kind of interesting. Could anyone pull off something like that...?"

"If you know you're the bad guy here, why not think about repenting for a change?"

Carlos is mocking me. He's famous for being a lighthearted ladies' man, and the rumors are all true. The Eastern District really is something if someone like him happens to be one of the best of the best. The Western District is actually easier to fight because they have no flexibility.

"Grk... I-let me go!" Miss Nazuna demands, still in my grip.

"Oh...I'd appreciate it if you didn't move so much. I, uh...I won't do anything with you."

I...I lied.

Actually, I *would* like to something with her.

Even if it's just talking.

But I know there's no point in confessing to her now.

It's okay. I can infer at least that much; I'm calm.

It's great that I managed to restrain her, but I haven't thought about what to do next.

The Guard Team is different from your garden-variety thugs. For a team that moves on gut instinct, they have excellent teamwork and often corner me with precisely controlled attacks. They've even begun to read my movements... Once Jun comes back after dropping off the casino girl, I might even be at a disadvantage.

Jun Sahara seems to be around my age, but she's not the leader of this team for no reason. She drives back her enemies with incredible judgement and reflexes coupled with horrifying precision.

They really are a scary bunch.

How did I end up becoming one of their targets?

While I think, something breaks the stalemate.

"This is getting ridiculous."

The middle-aged man in sunglasses produces something from his coat pocket.

Expressionless, he pulls the pin from the round, black object in his left hand

—

“Evade, Nazuna.”

That’s absurd.

...This is why the Guard Team can be such a pain.

The moment the object flies toward us, I feel Miss Nazuna’s entire body stiffen.

I launch myself off the ground with her in my arms and catch a glimpse of the ocean beyond the rubble.

The white waves are shining on the winter sea. They look beautiful.

As I wonder how I should express that emotion, an explosive noise fills the world—

Chapter 1-B: A Detective Short Story

<Ah-ah-ah—Aaahh... Testing...>

<All right, all right all right all *right*! Still lying flat against the floor for another apathetic day, you energetic pieces of shit? D'you enjoy having a soundless peaceful morning in your ear-holes? It's all cause I slept in today so I'm gonna demand some glorious gratitude from the listenership today and if you've got all that let's get this midday radio show started!>

<All right, we'll start off with a tune to get your lazy-ass asses going. I'm serious, bitches! It's the perfect song for shits who drag themselves to this island and risk their lives to waste it all. Today I'm putting on a 24-hour Bouyokudan album marathon. If you got something to say, catch me if you can, fuckers! Then again, I'm a lazy fuck too for putting on a CD and doing nothing for the rest of the day. But who gives a damn? Heehahahahahahaha! >

Sounds from the pirate radio known as Buruburu Airwaves filled the island through the speakers. At first the radio had been nothing but a nuisance to the islanders, but now it was just another part of the atmosphere that blended perfectly into the world.

But then again, some had completely failed to adjust to that atmosphere.

"Ohh...there's just something very different about this radio. Don't you agree, Sherlock Liverpool?"

"What are you talking about? You seemed to be enjoying it at home."

"It...well, it seems to somehow...diminish the hardboiled air of the island."

"Which is a good thing."

Siblings Charlotte and Sherlock walked through the Western District's underground, discussing the radio.

The underground, situated between the aboveground and the Pits, was the most lively place on the island and the place most resembling a functioning society.

From restaurants to pseudo-black market stores that sold goods from outside, the area once intended for first-rate corporations and their buildings was now filled with nameless businesses. Yet the area was not a business district at all, also being filled with residents and their homes. That was thanks to the fact that there was safety in numbers, and that the Western District's volunteer police force regularly patrolled the area to keep the peace.

The smell of gasoline from personal generators, the aroma of scrumptious food, and the rank odor of garbage swirled together into one indescribable mass, creating an air unique to the island.

However, the hotel aboveground where the Liverpool siblings lived was a step up in terms of living conditions. Though the hotel had been abandoned, someone seemed to have touched up the systems. It had running water and electricity, with clean beds and en-suite bathrooms—which was even better than some of the more haphazard apartments on the mainland.

Of course, they still had to pay rent to the 'manager' of the hotel, who controlled the building.

The 'manager' was in charge of part of the island's economy, regularly paying a protection fee to a stronger organization.

In any case, because she lived in such a safe environment, Charlotte almost never came underground unless she had work or shopping to do. Going to buy things was mostly Sherlock's job, and even when she was working he almost always followed her.

"Honestly. Doing work with my little brother at my side is completely contrary to the detective ideal I strive for," Charlotte complained mid-walk. Sherlock sighed loudly.

"Then what am I supposed to do, leave you alone?"

"Oh, Sherlock Liverpool. Are you worried about me?" Charlotte looked a little moved. Her brother was dispassionate.

"Let me give you an example, Charlotte. I wouldn't be surprised if you somehow dug up an unexploded shell from World War 2 and tried to disarm it singlehandedly. Then it would explode and I would pay the ultimate price for failing to keep you on a leash."

"How could there be an unexploded shell on an artificial island?"

"And you'd try to disarm it in a deserted place and end up taking it to the center of the island...where the main engine is. When the inevitable happens and it explodes, you'll sink the island. Then the bridge would collapse, and Japan's government would begin to suspect foreign involvement. Anxious officials would go out stomping ants to take out their stress...in other words, your life is on the same level as the ants," Sherlock concluded without even looking at his sister. Charlotte's eyes widened for a moment. Then,

"...I'm sorry, Sherlock Liverpool. I didn't understand a word of what you just said."

"It's fine. It was nothing meaningful, anyway."

"...It feels as though you're making fun of me, Sherlock Liverpool. ...Or maybe it's just my imagination?"

"It's not just your imagination. It worries me that you can't even figure that out."

Charlotte hung her head at Sherlock's merciless cynicism.

Casting a glance at his sister, Sherlock sighed and changed his tune.

"Then again, I think you're incredible. Not many people would go out of their way to become a detective in living conditions like this."

"Oh? Do you really think so?"

Charlotte seemed to blush, embarrassed. A hint of a smile rose to Sherlock's lips.

Watching cheer return to his sister's face, he reminisced about their shared past.

How, in a process so commonplace, they ended up in this destitute city.



Siblings Charlotte and Sherlock Liverpool were born to a British father and an American mother and raised near Yokohama Harbor.

Supposedly their father was a famous engineer overseas, and had moved to Japan as an architect to take part in the creation of a particular piece of art—the longest bridge in the world, and the largest artificial island in the world at its center.

He was an impulsive man who had decided to remain in Japan then, and married the siblings' mother, whom he met while clubbing in Roppongi. At least, that was what Charlotte heard from their mother.

Being a hardcore Sherlockian, he jumped on the chance to name his first child Charlotte, and the next child—a son born the very next year—Sherlock. That was the background behind the siblings' names.

Because the two names sounded very similar in Japanese, the siblings' mother would call Charlotte 'Lottie'. And as they grew up, the younger brother developed a complex about his own name.

Whenever something unusual happened at school or an unexplained incident shook the world, his classmates would joke, 'try deducing that, Sherlock!', or 'so who's the culprit?'. By the time he was in high school, the mockeries became more refined as people quipped about opium addictions and asked where 221B Baker Street was.

Sherlock was always a reserved person who never rose to provocation. In fact, he even scorned the people who made fun of him.

But his sister Charlotte always met their insults head-on.

"I will do all the detective work for you, Sherlock Liverpool!" She would brag naively, ever since they were in elementary school.

Sometimes, they would take their bicycles to the next town over in search of a Watson, and sometimes she would boast about wanting to solve difficult

cases showcased on television. Eventually, even reading newspaper articles with the words 'statute of limitations to expire soon' became taboo in their household.

"It's all right. You don't have to worry about being a detective," she would always say, but Sherlock would always sigh and retort,

"How am I supposed to not worry when you actually hide behind *utility poles* to shadow someone?"

"I-is there something wrong with that?"

"...Never mind."

He had thought his sister would wise up in time, but her enthusiasm was the only thing that improved—and Sherlock's headaches only snowballed.

At some point, being made fun of by his peers was trivial compared to his sister's bizarre behavior.

What seemed from the outside to be a peaceful life suddenly ended around the time Sherlock was preparing for college entrance exams.

Sherlock, and even the oblivious Charlotte could see that their parents were speaking to each other less and less. They never had overt arguments, but at some point Sherlock almost began to wish they would fight, clenching his teeth.

It would be one thing if their parents fought while Sherlock and Charlotte were helpless children, but it was another that they began a silent argument that no amount of force that the now-grown children mustered could stop.

They did not know why their parents were arguing. The siblings spoke to their parents less and less.

And one day, their father left home with the words, "*to the island...*"

As though he were stepping out to buy cigarettes.

Crossing the Etsusa Bridge, which he had personally helped to build, he never came back.

Almost immediately, their mother collapsed.

And the siblings were thrown into the real world in the blink of an eye.

After the funeral, they were suddenly forced to face reality in a land without a single relative to help. They had almost no money—their father must have taken it all when he left.

The night everything shattered, Charlotte smiled at her brother.

“Well then, shall we go?”

“Go? Where?”

As Sherlock mulled over his future, and what he should do about school, Charlotte said without a hint of hesitation—

“To find Dad.”

Charlotte’s smile was unbearably radiant to Sherlock, whose grief over their mother’s death had already been overshadowed by thoughts of logistics. She seemed almost like a being from a higher world altogether, far beyond his emotions or calculations.

“After all...we’re detectives.”

Soon, Sherlock accepted his sister’s smile.



“We’ve only been on this island for a year, but I think we’re lucky to have survived this long. There is a God in this world, I’m almost convinced,” Sherlock remarked.

Charlotte flashed her usual grin.

"Heh heh heh. There's nothing surprising about our survival. Excellent observational skills and the ability to camouflage oneself are but the basics of being an ace detective! Avoiding danger is a piece of cake."

"By that logic, you're a failure as a detective and at the top of the list of 'people most likely to die on this island'. But more importantly, I hope it occurs to you that a pair of caucasians like us couldn't possibly blend in in Japan!"

"Urgh...uh...I could cover that with the many detective skills I've honed over the—" Charlotte began hesitantly, but Sherlock cut her off without a hint of mercy.

"By that, you mean watching TV dramas like *Seibu Keisatsu*, *Shiritsu Tantei Hama Maiku*, *Abunai Deka*, *Tantei Monogatari*, and *Hagure Keiji Junjouha*. And half of those were about police detectives, not private investigators."

"But I didn't know the difference at the time, so it's quite acceptable! You would have known that if you'd moved past watching and stepped into observation, Sherlock Liverpool."

"Yes, that was the point. Why are you being so smug about *that*, anyway? Look. I might have let that slide if you'd at least referenced the Sherlock Holmes collection instead."

Charlotte hung her head.

"But...isn't it embarrassing to read stories featuring our namesake?"

"Of all the times to be perfectly on the point..."

Sherlock was left without even the strength to sigh. Charlotte scrambled to try and raise his spirits.

"But...well, we've done fine so far with the hardboiled image we've made!"

"If by hardboiled, you mean letting your little brother run part-time jobs to pay the rent every month," Sherlock lamented. Charlotte looked even more down.

"Ohh...that's why I can't argue with you. But I think our poverty might work in our favor, especially since it works with the hardboiled image..."

She looked so pitiful that Sherlock cut the sarcasm there and let his sincerity show.

"It's fine, Charlotte. Family is *supposed* to help each other."

"Oh, Sherlock Liverpool...your words sound so kind, but for some reason it almost feels like extra pressure on my shoulders."

"All right, all right. ...Whoa, we've walked pretty far in. Let's go back. Not even the volunteer police patrol this area often—it's dangerous here," Sherlock said, realizing that the area was deserted. He was clearly worried more for Charlotte than himself.

Though his consideration made Charlotte very happy, she felt like the most useless person in the world.

'No, I mustn't feel this way. If I show any weakness, I won't be able to protect my brother!'

Worrying about one of the less likely possibilities in their life, Charlotte slapped her cheeks and raised her voice.

"Let me say this, Sherlock Liverpool! From this point on—"

An explosion.

Just as Sherlock turned his attention to his sister, the ominous noise sounded. It was at the very end of this passageway, and if his ears were to be trusted it was the sound of a bomb going off.

"What the—?! Ch-Charlotte!"

"From this point on, I— hm? ...What was that noise, Sherlock Liverpool?"

Charlotte snapped out of her half-daze and also turned her attention to the sound.

She seemed to have also understood that it was an explosion—but in contrast to her brother, she ran off the moment she realized it.

Toward the source of the noise—into the deserted pathway.

“Charlotte?!”

Sherlock was the bewildered one now. Though he knew his sister’s character full well, he was more scared than usual.

“Th-ther- there may be a fire! We should get to the scene immediately!”

“It might be dangerous, Charlotte. We should get out of here—”

“What if people need to be rescued?”

When Charlotte retorted without a hint of hesitation, Sherlock went silent and ran after her. He had known since childhood that there was no stopping his sister at times like this.

‘Yeah. Charlotte’s always had a strong sense of justice. Always leaping before she looks.’

As Sherlock reminisced about their childhood memories, Charlotte spoke up mid-sprint.

“Urgh...if only the explosion had happened *after* I finished my line!”

“Then what?”

Sherlock was fully expecting a silly answer, but perhaps she would say something surprisingly wise given the urgency of their situation.

“Then it would have been like a scene straight out of a movie!”

“...Charlotte...” Shedding tears, Sherlock continued, “please give me back the time I wasted being moved by your worry for the potential victims.”

“P-please don’t look at me with such pitiful eyes!”

Taken aback by her brother’s tears, Charlotte decided to take back what she had just said. As a result, her footsteps grew quicker.

They were not far from the scene when she suddenly raised her voice again.

“Oh! Sherlock Liverpool!”

"Wh-what is it?"

"I completely forgot what I was going to say after the 'from this point on' bit!"

"I see the smoke, Charlotte!"

Realizing that Sherlock had completely ignored her, and that her plan to ease his anxiety had failed, Charlotte decided to focus her efforts into rescuing the injured.

She sprinted through the passageway, which seemed to resemble a hospital hall. It was quite bright thanks to the volunteer police changing the lightbulbs regularly for security's sake, but the color of the walls and the graffiti etched on them were endlessly dark and heavy.

It was suffocating.

There was no hint of human presence. Sometimes they could hear voices, but they were coming mostly from far behind them.

But when they turned the final corner, they saw the backs of several people. The Liverpool siblings were not first on the scene, as it happened. And if no one was scrambling to help, it must mean that no one was injured.

At least, they didn't smell any blood.

The area was lit by natural sunlight instead of fluorescent lights. The siblings wondered for a moment if the explosion had taken out the ceiling, but that would require a massively powerful bomb, which would have caused more of a commotion.

"Hah...hah... Wh-what's happened here?"

Charlotte came to a stop and looked up. There stood a mountain of rubble and abandoned construction materials, around which were several onlookers.

"Oh no! Where did all this junk come from?"

"Calm down, Charlotte. This place has always been a junkyard. It doesn't look much different from usual."

Some of the wooden debris was smoking but there was no fire in sight. It was hazy there, but more because of the dust than any smoke.

The junkyard was where those that were thrown out of the world were thrown out for the second time.

Considering that it was usually abandoned, it was likely that no one was injured.

But Charlotte's relief was short-lived.

She heard something collapsing near the top of the mound, and soon a large shadow began to fall toward her.

"Hm? Huh?!"

"Charlotte!"

The moment Sherlock pulled her aside by the arm, the figure landed.

The onlookers stared, wondering if the newcomer was hurt.

But the figure was much too beautiful to have been injured.

"That was close. ...Are you all right?"

The slender man, who seemed to be about 20 years old, spoke to the girl in his arms.

The girl seemed unhurt, but she was unconscious and did not reply.

"Uh...umm..." Charlotte hesitated, looking up at the young man.

He was holding something long and blue under one arm, and seemed to be having a bit of difficulty carrying the girl because of it. At first the object was hard to recognize; but Sherlock soon realized it was a katana inside a blue sheath and worriedly called to his sister.

"Ch-Charlotte!"

Perhaps sensing danger from the young man, Sherlock held his sister's wrist and refused to let go.



The young man, however, seemed not to notice him—instead, he quietly spoke to Charlotte.

“Please...take care of her.”

“Ah...”

As Charlotte floundered in confusion, the young man gently placed the girl in his arms on the ground.

She had beautiful, short black hair, and looked almost too radiant for the island. But because she was unconscious, it was hard to tell if her personality was cheerful to match.

“Umm...who are—”

By the time Charlotte looked up, the young man was gone.

She looked around, bewildered. All she spotted was the young man’s back as he disappeared through the crowd with incredible agility.

The onlookers exchanged blank stares, but eventually turned to Charlotte and Sherlock. They probably suspected that they were friends of the young man. And even if they didn’t, the onlookers must have been curious to see what the duo would do with the girl now in their custody.

Charlotte got down, and because the girl was still unconscious, only sat her up. She could feel a normal pulse on the girl’s neck.

“W-we have to take her to a doctor—”

“Forget it, Charlotte. I don’t want us to get caught up in a mess like this. Incidentally, about that guy just now...”

Sherlock trailed off, looking at the direction in which the young man disappeared, and thought out loud.

“Didn’t he...look kind of like the boy in the picture we got?”

“Huh?”

Charlotte looked up, taken by surprise.

Almost simultaneously, the mountain of rubble began creaking and voices traveled to the ground.

The voices were louder than the murmurs of the crowd, so it was clear that they formed a conversation.

"Argh! Why?! Is this island so old that a single grenade can blow a hole in the ground? I was so damned sure it was just short of lethal, even if I got a direct hit..."

"Nah, this yard here's always been a big hole. That pile you blew up just happened to be pretty frail."

"Shit! Where's the bastard hiding?!"

"Wish he'd just died in that explosion."

"Dumbass. We're supposed to bring him in alive."

There was nothing but danger in their words.

'What do I do?'

As Charlotte wracked her brains, she heard people descending from above.

'Was the man just now protecting this girl from a gang?'

Detective and police stories from her childhood began to come alive in her head.

Perhaps the unconscious girl was an innocent hounded by gangsters, an unfortunate runaway from a rich family, or a slave who had been sold to someone on the island—whatever the case, Charlotte's very existence refused all but one option.

"Sherlock Liverpool! Please take her other shoulder!"

"Wha—"

Sherlock turned in shock. Charlotte's usual cheer was gone, replaced by pure gravity as she tried to lift the mysterious girl.

“Quickly!”

“R-right.”

‘She wants to take her to the doctor. Yeah, that must be it. Charlotte must’ve noticed a serious injury on her or something.’

Though Charlotte’s show of bravado wasn’t particularly notable, it was so far from her usual self that Sherlock was immediately convinced to follow her lead. Even knowing that getting involved in commotions like this on the artificial island was a surefire way to shorten their lifespans.



“H-hey, hold it!”

As he descended the heap of rubble, he spotted a figure clad in familiar clothing pushing past the crowds.

When Zhang realized that the figure was Nazuna, he noticed that she was not moving of her own free will, but being carried.

The people carrying her, however, were not Yakumo, but a man and a woman with blond hair. Although it was impossible to tell if they were foreigners or just Japanese people with bleached hair, it was still clear that someone other than Yakumo Amagiri was taking an unmoving Nazuna somewhere.

Perhaps they were trying to take her to a doctor—but in that case, it would be best to entrust Nazuna to the Eastern District’s very own Master Physician.

“Stop right there!” Zhang roared, clambering down—

But waiting for him at the base of the pile was cold, hard reality.

“Well, well, what do we have here? Greatest Zhang, champion of the underground wrestling ring. Or should I say the lieutenant of the Guard Team?” Mocked a man clad in bulletproof clothing.

'The volunteer police.'

The Western District's volunteer police force, led by former police officer Souji Kuzuhara, was one of the more famous groups in the area. Unlike the Guard Team, which only moved under orders, the volunteer police was a self-governing group that patrolled the Western District and took care of unruly people as a cornerstone of public security.

Though fully aware of all this, Zhang raised his voice nonetheless.

"Shaddap. Outta my way," he spat, turning to the blond duo in the distance.

"Can't let you do that, sir."

There was a clear sense of hostility in the policeman's voice. Not one rooted in hatred, but something that seemed closer to rivalry.

Some assumed that relations between the Western and Eastern Districts were like that of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War. And that was not entirely untrue. The volunteer police force and the Guard Team were essentially the faces of the Western and Eastern Districts, most familiar to the common residents. Sometimes the members of these two teams were also influenced by the so-called rivalry, like the man standing in Zhang's way.

Even if that was not the case, as long as the volunteer police's ears were to the crowd, they could only assume that Zhang and the others were the 'gangsters' chasing after the injured girl. If the policemen let Zhang go, they might be reprimanded by their superiors.

Perhaps the policemen could be convinced that the girl or the young man who had carried her down were the ones behind the explosion, but the young man had already gone and the girl was unconscious. Not only that, the volunteer police had only arrived on the scene after the Liverpool siblings had begun to carry off the girl. It was only natural their attention was turned to the Guard Team, which descended at that very moment.

And even if the volunteer police had been watching from the very beginning, with their limited numbers they would have made the decision to go after Zhang and the others first anyway. Perhaps if there were more men on hand, or if their leader Kuzuhara was around, they would not have targeted the Guard Team alone.

"Fine! I'll explain later, so stop those two!"

"Who? ...I'd like you to explain the explosion first."

"Goddammit, there's no time! Shit! They're gone!"

Anxious, Zhang tried to shove the man aside. But other policemen stepped up before them.

"If you cause a disturbance here in the Western District, we will have no choice but to take you in."

The larger policemen stood in a barricade in front of Zhang. Some of them were even larger than him, but the lieutenant of the Guard Team did not even blink.

In fact, he put on a competitive grin like the champion wrestler he was.

"...I warned you."

The first policeman's eyes widened in shock.

"You did not—"

Before he could finish, the man was flying through the air.

By the time he felt the pressure on his neck, Zhang's hand was already far away. The man was far from the ground, and his consciousness was also far from his head.

But the impact of hitting the wall dragged his consciousness back into him, and the ringing in his spine turned to pain that ransacked his nerves.

"Urgh...agh..."

No one expected such a quick blow to the neck. Zhang probably hadn't even been serious, but he had still sent the man—weighing in at over 80 kilograms in his bulletproof gear—flying into the air.

"I warned you in my head. Problem?"

"S-son of a bitch..."

The man's voice was a hoarse whisper compared to Zhang's.

As if on reflex, one of the taller policemen reached out to suppress Zhang—but Zhang quickly grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in.

The next moment, Zhang's massive hand was over the tall man's face in a crushing grip.

Little by little his fingers tightened, as though screaming that his power had no limit.

By the time bones began creaking, another man drew a custom-made truncheon. It was cheap, but still packed a punch.

"D-don't move!"

As if on cue, the rest of the policemen drew their truncheons as well. Some were also carrying large knives, to the cheers of the excited crowds.

"...Lookey here. I heard the volunteer cops fought hand-to-hand."

"That's just Kuzuhara's shtick, Mr. Zhang," said a voice from atop the pile of rubble. "Knock it off before you kick us off a war with the West. But I gotta hand it to ya—you're being pretty lively for a guy who's supposed to specialize in cold fury."

The voice belonged to a grinning man of Latino descent who wore a pair of blue shades.

He was followed down the mound by men and women who clearly did not belong in lawful society. The onlookers tensed, and the circle of people around the commotion widened.

"Like hell, Carlos. The Western District ain't stupid enough to consider *this* an attack," Zhang noted, his grip still on the tall policeman's face. Carlos snickered.

"Yili aside, jokes don't get anywhere with their boss Ei *Daren* or Lihuang the overseer."

The rest of the Guard Team tossed out comments as they followed Carlos.

"Oh dear, it's the volunteer police. This is what happens when Mr. Gen resorts to grenades."

"Pah. This is turning into a fine mess. I oughta just take care of these rubberneckers."

"E-enough, Mr. Gen. We're in a tight spot as it is."

"...I'm sleepy."

"...6 7 5 7...1 7 3 5 3 6 4 4 8 6 6 2 2 9 6 0 8 6 7 6 6 5 0 2...2114761971906
6836700078...78619525727...uh...7249607749530158270401915630348962
7...63156369...12935217020929815099957118...9...77...uh...hmm...hey. Hey.
What comes after the 835000th digit of pi?"

"We'll decide with a die roll."

"...We need four more numbers for that."

"Ever heard of a useful little toy called a 10-sided die?"

"Hahahaha! Aren't you beating the world record by a long shot, Madoka?"

"No, well...I...I just have an eight hundred thousand-digit number memorized."

"That's enough of confusing people. I oughta blow you all away with the crowd."

"I think you're old enough to learn to behave yourself, Mr. Gen."

"I don't want to hear that from a man who thinks with his cock, Carlos."

"Not like I'm doing that now. Especially not with men."

"Hahahahahaha! Look at Mr. Zhang go! He's just wailing away on his own!"

The Guard Team, full of colorful characters.

The distorted atmosphere hanging over them, and their surprising numbers, overwhelmed the volunteer police.

The policemen could not back down when so many Western District residents were watching. But with their lack of experience the idea of calming down to listen to the Guard Team wasn't an option. So there was only one thing they could resort to.

"D-don't get cocky, bastards!"

The bluff came from an unnecessarily loud voice, which attracted the attention of the Guard Team and the onlookers alike.

"W-we got in touch with Mr. Kuzuhara. He's gonna be here any minute now!"

The crowd buzzed.

The volunteer police's desperate claim would have sounded foolish otherwise, but the onlookers welcomed the mention of the name.

They were simply curious.

With no concern for the conflict between East and West, for the injured volunteer police, for the explosion, or for their own safety, they simply cried out for the arrival of the man named Souji Kuzuhara.

"Fuck it. Kuzuhara this, Kuzuhara that. Is that the only name you know how to fucking spell over westside?" Zhang growled, glaring at the volunteer police. Carlos chimed in, as laid-back as ever.

"Can't help it that Kuzuhara's damned strong."

"...Pitiful. I could end it in 15 minutes tops if we were in the ring."

"In other words, you couldn't do that *outside* the ring?"

"Pro wrestlers are king off-stage too, dammit! ...I just need more training."

Even through gritted teeth Zhang acknowledged Kuzuhara's strength.

'*Sounds almost like he got beat before,*' Carlos thought, but he did not voice the comment.

"Mr. Kuzuhara's gonna wipe the floor with your asses! Better drop those weapons if you know what's good for you. Especially you, four-eyes! He'll beat you to death with his bare hands if he sees you with a gun!"

"Oh. Right," Carlos nodded, glancing at his gun.

Supposedly Kuzuhara's hatred of guns went beyond loathing; he was infamous for being particularly hard on those who used firearms in their crimes.

"Think fast."

For a second, the policeman wondered if he should catch the gun. It would be easy to get out of the way, but what if the gun exploded from the impact of the drop?

Worrying over an accident of astronomically low odds, the man found himself catching the gun in his arms as though receiving an egg, as gently as he could and with as much tension his muscles could manage.

"W-watch it—"

Narrowing managing to catch the weapon, the man looked from the gun to the Guard Team and back again.

Though the Guard Team might have more guns concealed on them, the only one holding one in hand was himself. Everyone else was unarmed, and at a distance from him.

The fact that he managed to take a gun from Carlos, the only gunman in the commotion, made him proud.

So he found himself doing the unthinkable.

Pointing the gun at the Guard Team.

"Heh...heh heh...good, good. Just stay right there and don't move. Whoa, I know how to undo the safety, so don't get any cute ideas," the man said, disarming the safety. He was practically advertising his incompetence from way he kept glancing at the gun as he worked on it.

If they were in the U.S., he would have been turned turned into swiss cheese by that point. But in spite of the island's lawless state, it was still in Japan, where firearms were far from common. Even the policeman must not have thought that far.

But the Guard Team showed no sign of concern.

Safety aside, they knew that Carlos had emptied the gun before tossing it to the man. They also knew that he had three more guns concealed on his person, along with backups on his ankle and back for a total of five.

The hapless policeman was left to believe that he had the high ground.

"Listen up. Just hold still and wait. I shoot whatever so much as twitches."

"Huh. Well, I guess this is my fault for giving you the gun."

"Felling sorry now?" The officer taunted with a conceited smile. But Carlos shot back with a pitiful look.

"Well, yeah. For you."

"The hell?"

"Y'know, I figured you'd be out of a job from today on."

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Before the officer could ask, he sensed a changed in the murmurs of the crowd.

The whispers were slowly transforming into cheers. The onlookers nearby were giving him sorry looks.

'No way—'

But it was too late.

A massive hand appeared from behind the man and grabbed the gun.

A simple signature move.

The special glove over the hand, woven with bulletproof fibers.

Those two facts were enough to convince the man of the newcomer's identity, and he found his entire body shaking in indescribable terror.

"M-Mr. K-K-K-Kuzuha—"

“Hahahahahaha! Look at him! It looks like he’s laughing! Hahaha! This is hilarious!” A girl from the Guard Team howled in laughter, pointing at the policeman.

The policeman stifled a sob as he finally called the newcomer’s name.

“M-Mr. Kuzuhara!”

The man wore an air around himself.

His eyes, his build, his footsteps—they overwrote everything around him to paint the world in his color.

Even the cheering crowds went silent when he drew near, swallowing their breaths to watch his every move. It was like the temperature changed around him, but the jury was out on whether it had gotten colder or hotter.

Even the smile-happy Carlos stiffened at the man’s entrance, and Zhang greeted him with a look equal parts hostile and entertained.

And so, Souji Kuzuhara—captain of the Western District’s volunteer police force—took control of the space with his presence alone.

“...What are you doing,” growled the captain of the volunteer police as he took away the gun from his subordinate from the same eye-level as Zhang.
“...You’re tired.”

“Huh? Sir? No, I—”

Kuzuhara was not a man to discipline his subordinates with violence.

The volunteer police knew that as well, but whatever the motive, the policeman was found threatening people with a gun. The men who had seen what power Kuzuhara unleashed on thugs with guns understood the life-threatening terror.

Placing his hands on the subordinate’s shoulders—

“You’re tired. Go home and get some rest.”

“Uh, I...I—”

He had to come up with an excuse, the man thought, but the fear and confusion stopped the words in his throat. Kuzuhara let none of his emotions show as he gave a simple order.

“I understand. Go get some rest.”

The policeman could feel the grip on his shoulders tighten microscopically.

His superior’s words, themselves fear incarnate, clung to his nerves as an absolute command.

Unable to even respond, the subordinate left the scene as though fleeing.

Kuzuhara neither looked back nor chastised him nor saw him off.

Instead, he apologized on his behalf.

“...It looks like my subordinate crossed the line. My apologizes.”

“No big deal. One of our very own lummoxes started the mess,” Carlos snickered, the tension finally gone. “Anyway, I was sure you’d at least pulverize the poor sack, or at least fire him.”

“Any newbie would have lost his cool if a gun fell into his hands. It’d be cruel to pulverize or fire him,” Kuzuhara replied, unperturbed by Carlos’s rude assumptions. That was because he was dating a woman who ignored the rules of etiquette entirely, but Kuzuhara remained the picture of stoicism nonetheless.

Zhang chimed in, sounding sarcastic for once.

“It’s almost crueler to let him come back to work tomorrow after the shit he went through today.”

“Maybe,” Kuzuhara replied. After that, even Zhang had nothing to say.

With the dozen or so men Kuzuhara brought along, the volunteer police outnumbered the Guard Team two-to-one. But Kuzuhara was the only one who could balance out the odds against Zhang and Carlos. In other words, he was the weight who kept things even.

And in that stalemate, Kuzuhara was the first to move. Without a second thought he handed the gun he took away from his subordinate to Carlos.

"Here."

"That was easy. Aren't you worried I'd shoot you the second I got my gun back?"

"With an empty gun? Or with one of the loaded ones you're hiding on you?"

"Well, you got me there," Carlos admitted, his respect for and caution toward Kuzuhara increasing.

"Thought you hated guns," Zhang said.

"And I still do. Police officers and soldiers are the only ones who're allowed to carry guns here in Japan," he said, as though chastising himself. He then turned to the Guard Team. "I trust you people to a degree, but it still doesn't sit right with me. I'd prefer it if you put your guns away when I'm around."

Like a warning bell his words resounded through the minds of the Guard Team, and even the onlookers and his own subordinates. Zhang and the Guard Team members who did not use firearms seemed unaffected, but Carlos's face was rigid and cold sweat formed on his face.

With that, Kuzuhara cracked his neck and scanned the area.

"Now that I've apologized for my subordinate...it's time to get to work."

Though his words did not foreshadow violence, the tension in the air skyrocketed anyway.

"Members of the Eastern District's Guard Team. I'm going to have you tell me what happened here."



'We just have to take her to a doctor. Then we'll wash our hands of this mess.'

They had been running for many minutes.

'Open the clinic door. Don't say our names and don't let anyone see our faces if we can help it. That's all we can do. That'll be for the best,' Sherlock repeated in his head as he tried to ignore the two facts he deduced.

One was that his sister had no idea where to find a doctor.

And the other was that his sister—without so much as a hint of hesitation—was headed aboveground to the hotel where they made their home.

Words are dancing in the darkness.

"...Yeah. The explosion took place at the junkyard, right? We're still fine."

There is no intonation or emotion in the voice. The words twist and writhe in an eerie dance.

"...Heh heh heh...I was worried for a second. Thought something went off by mistake."

He seems to be on the telephone with someone. The man chats and leans back in his chair. But his face is hidden in shadows. Though indoors, he leaves the lights turned off to cast a darker shadow over his face.

"...Right. Yeah. Kuzuhara's begun to move...you watch out, too."

He hangs up and slowly gets to his feet.

"Heh heh... Kuzuhara, huh. I used to feel sick just saying his name. But now it's almost pleasant."

Though he talks about someone of significance, there is no affection, hatred, love, or envy in his voice. He utters the word 'Kuzuhara' as though it is simply a symbol.

"...Hm?"

The darkness seems to have noticed. He must be a sharp one if he noticed the cameras and bugs I installed myself.

It is too dangerous to proceed further. Though my voice is quiet...or is it audible?

I repeat, it is too dangerous to proceed further.

One wrong move, and he will know. It is too dangerous to proceed further.

"...Heh...who knew someone would end up bugging me?"

Mayday. Mayday.

This is Spring-heeled Joplin, contacting Spring-heeled Joplin.

Reality threatens to encroach upon me.

So I must return to being a simple resident.

Requesting observation. Requesting observation.

"Hey. Whoever set this up...you listening? I don't know how long you've been spying on me, but you already know. Looking at my face isn't going to help you. And figuring out my plans won't be enough to stop them."

Take over my senses. And report the results to me at a later time.

As usual. Yes, as usual.

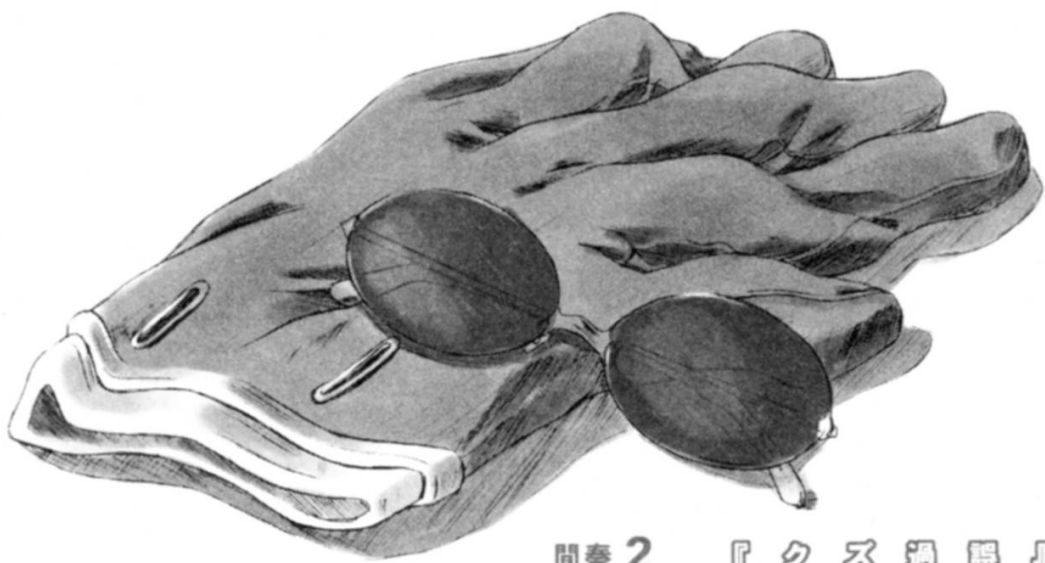
"Then again, maybe if you were constantly looking over my shoulder...Heh heh heh..."

The bugs and the cameras go blank in unison, and the world of Spring-heeled Joplin falls to darkness. It has blacked out!

I leave the rest to you, Spring-heeled Joplin. I leave the rest to you.

Understood, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Spring-heeled Joplin will take over the rest.



間奏2 『クス過誤』

Interlude 2: One Man's Trash is his Mistake

He wanted to forget that memory now.

But it was a memory he should never forget.

That was what Souji Kuzuhara continued to tell himself.

It would never come to an end.

He would continue to see it in his dreams.

Because only in his dreams could he be punished now.

With that thought in mind, Kuzuhara accepted his inescapable nightmares once more.



'I wanted to be a hero.

'Not a warrior, but a hero.

'That was what I said, but that wasn't actually the truth.

'I was just...scared.

'I was scared of killing someone. Scared of ending someone's life with my own two hands.'

So Souji Kuzuhara aimed for the hand.

He had seen many a fictional cop pull this trick; on TV dramas and cartoons.

Believing that he also could pull it off, he acted to escape the fear of taking a life—

And brought about the worst possible scenario.



Before his eyes a man trembled, clutching his right hand.

"My hand...my hand...!" He wheezed, almost sobbing. But he quickly wrapped up his bloodied hand in his sleeve and began to stagger away like a drunkard.

"Stop!"

Kuzuhara did not need to remember who this man was at this point. But he knew well that the man was a criminal he had to apprehend.

He made to chase right after him.

But at that moment, the young Kuzuhara spotted something.

The young police officer who worked with hope and pride in his heart spotted something he should not have seen.

A single stream of red beginning in the shadows.

And the source of the flow—the skinny arm of the child lying there.

"Fuck...fuck...! My hand! What the fuck did you do to my hand?!"

He could hear the man screaming; but Kuzuhara was already rooted to the spot.

'She might still be alive.'

'It might not have been my gun.'

Raising his vain hopes to a god he never believed in, he forced his frozen feet to take a step forward.

And at that moment, his ideal world crumbled as the girl in the distance and the sea of blood was dragged before him in the blink of an eye.

And images of the girl and the bullet began to shoot past him everywhere as though time itself was being rewound.

What the crime scene inspectors told him countless times came back to life in his head.

The bullet hit the wall of the container next to the storage room at a very low angle, partly crumpled as it flew forward at a slightly different trajectory.

Into Kuzuhara's blind spot.

Into the head of a little girl hiding there.

The crumpled bullet successfully drove itself into the girl's head, leaving a crueler mark than usual in its wake.

And then—

And then—

And then—

The images converged on the mass of flesh lying before him and fell forward.

"H-hey..."

Part of her head had been blown away, leaving her face a grotesque mess.

She must have just started elementary school. The girl seemed to be about the age to be playing with dolls, but it was her body that looked more like a doll—limp and completely still.

No breathing.

No pulse.

No consciousness, no voice, no memories of the past, and no hopes for the future.

In other words, her life was gone.

Kuzuhara wandered for what seemed like an eternity before the understanding finally hit him.

Perhaps an eternity might have been preferable—but his mistaken flow of time came to a cruel end and gave Kuzuhara no real time at all. No time to think, no time to have regrets.

“Ah...AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

In his dreams, he cried out.

Had he screamed so loudly in reality as well? Or did his howl resound even further? Not even Kuzuhara himself knew the answer.

He had screamed to destroy the reality before him. And now, as his all-erasing cry came to an end, the girl’s face melted and was replaced by the face of a man.

“Hey there.”

“...!”

He had never seen anything like the man’s face before. The vaguely unbalanced features sneered at Kuzuhara.

“How does it feel to shrink back from killing a villain and kill a little girl with your own two hands?”

“Who...are you?”

‘I know him.’

‘I know this bastard.’

“How does it feel to shrink back shrink back shrink back from killing a villain kill a little girl with your own your own your own your own your own your own two hands?”

“Stop...stop it.”

"How does it feel to shrink back shrink back shrink back from killing a villain
kill a little girl with your own your own your own your own your own two
hands?"

"I told you to stop it!"

[illegible]

The man's face shifted from one form to the next.

Into the face of his innocent superior who was shot to death because of his mistake.

Into the face of the girl's father, who shot the superior to death.

Into the face of the girl's mother, who screamed next to him.

Into the face of the investigator who told him that his bullet was the one that killed the girl.

Into the face of the police official apologizing on television.

And into the face of the little girl.

And finally, into his own face.

And Kuzuhara finally remembered.

That though the face kept changing, the voice never did.

That the voice belonged to the escaped man whose right hand he had shot off.

And at that moment, he was dragged back into reality.



“—wake up, Kuzu. Kuzu! Souji! Soujiiiiii!”

Someone was shaking him violently. Kuzuhara opened his eyes.

“You looked like you were having a nightmare, Souji. Are you okay?”

Next to him was a familiar face.

Pale skin and red eyes, with attractive features and a childlike expression.

“Oh...Kelly.”

“What’s wrong, Souji? Was it a bad dream?”

As the woman furrowed her brow, Kuzuhara remembered that he was in the van that acted as the moving broadcast station for Buruburu Airwaves, which doubled as its DJ Kelly Yatsufusa’s home.

‘Right. Come to think of it...this is the first time I had this dream when I was with Kelly.’

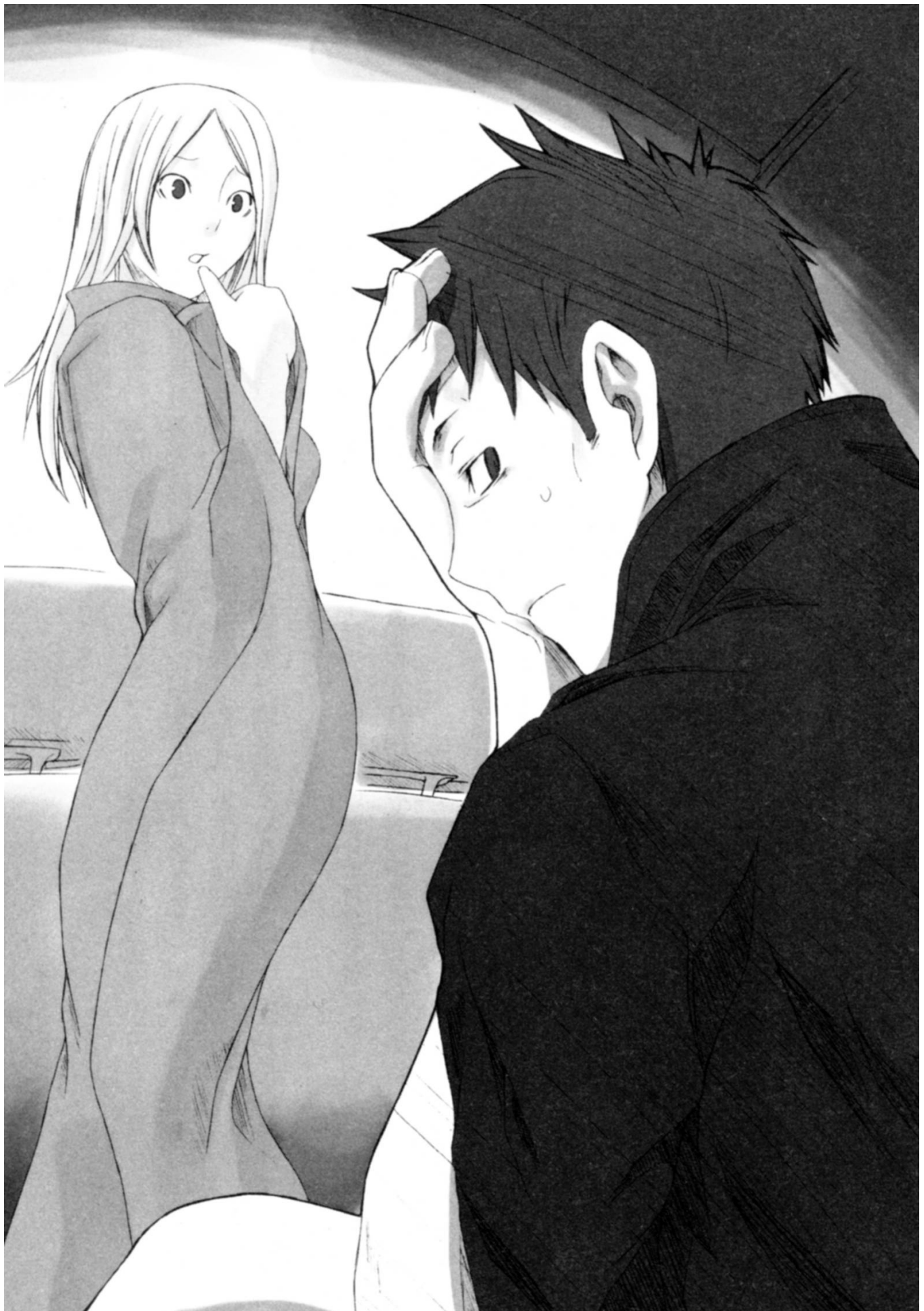
Forcing his senses awake, Kuzuhara sat up and reached for his shirt.

“Ugh. I put on a Bouyokudan CD the whole damned day today, and it was like generation asshole or something. All that nostalgic-as-fuck punk rock just wanna made me go back to the five o’clock shadow days, y’know?”

“When have you ever had a five o’clock shadow?”

“...Anyway, what the hell was that all about? Dream about huge-ass monsters coming to eat you alive or something?” Kelly asked, her style of speech a complete mismatch for her looks, as she stared at Kuzuhara.

Kuzuhara said nothing. Kelly put on a darker look.



"Hey, does this have anything to do with the girl you met at the resto earlier?"

"You saw?"

"Relax, you don't have the skills to cheat on me or anything. And I know that girl—and she's not the type to ever date you. But its still does bother me just a teensy bit."

Kelly seemed to pout, looking away, but before Kuzuhara could even respond she took the blanket in her hands and wrapped it all over his head.

"And-that-is-why-you'd-better tellmewhatthatnightmarewasabout, dumbass! Heehahahaha!"

"Aaaaaaaagh—"

Unable to speak even if he wanted to, Kuzuhara struggled to keep breathing and remembered why he had that nightmare.

Convinced that the girl he met the other day was the reason, he recalled their meeting at the restaurant.

It was near the end of his shift, when he was about to have a late lunch.

A girl from the Eastern District had come to tell him something. The stuff of his nightmares.



The explosion at the junkyard was ultimately deemed the Guard Team's responsibility, albeit one they caused while carrying out their work.

The Western District's organization had contacted him as he listened to the Guard Team's explanation—the message said to send them back to the Eastern District.

The executives of the districts must have come to an agreement.

Incidents like this were not uncommon, so Kuzuhara was not particularly bothered. Other than the disappointed onlookers and the fight the younger policemen tried to pick with the Eastern District, things were fine.

But before he received word from the executives, he heard a particularly memorable name from the Eastern District.

'Yakumo Amagiri, huh.'

Kuzuhara did not have any particular opinion on the name.

He had led the volunteer police on the island for three years, but not once had he ever met or even glimpsed the so-called Killer Ghoul.

He sometimes even wondered if Yakumo Amagiri existed at all, but those who controlled the island seemed to assume he did. The reason Kuzuhara never met him was likely because Yakumo was said to move mostly in the Eastern District and the Pits.

Above all, Yakumo Amagiri probably did not approach because the volunteer police patrolled specific routes on a regular basis. Even if he was present on the patrol route, perhaps the police's presence compelled him to stay quiet, Kuzuhara thought. And yet he could not confidently say that the urban legend was real.

Kuzuhara knew well the Guard Team's skill. How could anyone face them so many times and emerge unscathed?

Could someone like that really exist?

Or perhaps he really was just a legend after all?

Kuzuhara had seen the Eastern District's boss several times. He was the type to use the Guard Team to create an urban legend for the sake of entertainment. He and the rainbow-haired terrorist were of similar minds.

Kuzuhara ate his omelet-soba combo in silence as he thought—

"Umm..."

A muted female voice.

When he finally realized that she must be talking to him, he looked up. There stood a girl in a leather jacket, whose eyes were hidden beneath her bangs.

She flinched when she glimpsed the scars on Kuzuhara's face, and quickly bowed.

"G-good afternoon! Um... you would be Mr. Kuzuhara, yes?"

"I know you...you're from the—" Kuzuhara began, but he was quickly interrupted by the voices of the children at the restaurant.

"Hey, look! This girl's making a move on Kuzu!"

"Not the other way around?"

"Is this an affair?"

"You can't leave Kelly, Kuzu!"

"Kuzu's gonna throw her away like a used rag! With a big life insurance policy on her!"

"Don't be stupid. There's no way Kuzu could have an affair! But I bet Kelly's gonna misunderstand anyway."

"But he's still gonna survive—I mean, he's Kuzu!"

"Then he's gonna watch the van burn and light his cigarette and say, 'I told you you'd get burned...!'"

"You're awful, Kuzu...disgusting!"

"You really are trash!"

"Total trash!"

"We can't even recycle you!"

"Half of all the trash in the world is bad for the earth, you know."

"You're the opposite of Bufferin!"

"Enemy of girls!"

"They say every man has seven enemies when he goes outside...but Kuzu's enemies are all the girls in the whole wide world!"

"That's why Kuzu is always gonna be Kuzu—eek!"

At the conclusion of the children's chorus, their mother came up behind them and hit their heads with the back of her knife.

The eldest son was dragged into the kitchen by his ear, clutching his aching head. His siblings trailed after, horrified.

Kuzuhara watched them depart with a sigh, then turned to the girl.

"You're...Miss Sahara. Captain of the Guard Team, correct?"

"Oh, yes!" Jun said, finally snapping out of her shock. "I...uh...I heard that some of our members caused trouble for you earlier. So, umm! I-I'm very sorry!"

Kuzuhara did not know what to do as Jun bowed nervously.

Jun did not look like the type to belong on the Guard Team, let alone the artificial island. But Kuzuhara had seen her before when he was bodyguarding Yili—Jun had been there as Gitarin's bodyguard, giving orders to the Guard Team.

He also knew that the two cylindrical cases slung over her shoulders contained custom-made lightweight chainsaws. Supposedly she became a different person when she started the engines, but Kuzuhara had never seen her in that state.

'Then again, the Eastern District is full of crazy characters.' He thought, ignoring the fact that he himself could catch bullets in his palms.

The girl, he acknowledged, was indeed the leader of the Guard Team. And taking into account the fact that his superior in the Western District was also a beautiful woman, he supposed the two sides were not so different after all.

"About what happened at lunchtime, right? I think the bigwigs got things sorted out. You didn't have to come all this way to apologize."

"No, but...I thought it would be good to apologize in person anyway."

"...I see. Take a seat."

'Maybe she has another reason for coming here,' he thought, pointing her to the seat across from his.

Being a central figure in the Eastern District, she must have a very good excuse for coming all this way.

'If someone told me to go alone to the Eastern District's casino...I'd turn them down on the spot,' he thought, putting himself in Jun's shoes. *'I have to hand it to her.'*

Or perhaps she really did come to the Western District without a thought, but Kuzuhara doubted that such a person could lead the Guard Team.

"...There's no need for formalities. You wanted to talk about something, right?"

"...Yes." Jun smiled faintly, glad that Kuzuhara was quick to pick up on things. She also must have been put at ease by the sight of him interacting with the children.

But as soon as she began to speak, her smile was wiped away.

"...I should have come to talk to you in the summer, as soon as it happened, but... I'd just like to confirm something. Did Miss Yili tell you about what happened?"

Kuzuhara stiffened at the mention.

Several months ago, while Kuzuhara was on the mainland to visit the graves of his superior and the girl he killed, there was a serial murder case on the artificial island.

The victims were executives of the organizations controlling the two districts. The killer timed his actions specifically that Kuzuhara was not present, and shed a great deal of blood in the city.

"No. It was all over by the time I came back. The volunteer police had almost no involvement in the case, and Yili just told me that I didn't need to know."

"I... I see. So that's what she said."

"...Frankly, I'd be happy if you could tell me what happened. And don't worry, I won't tell anyone that I heard from you." Kuzuhara said gravely.

Jun hesitated, but eventually she nodded and revealed the cruel truth.

"...What I'm about to say might be difficult for you to hear. I know I'm being selfish...but I would be grateful if you could listen."

"..."

"Will you...protect this island with me?"

It was an unusually grave proposition. Kuzuhara found himself frowning.

But the moment Jun continued,

He understood.

That his assumption that he was forgiven had been wrong.

That the incident that destroyed Souji Kuzuhara's world had not yet come to a close.

"Ginga Kanashima...the one person you lost at the shootout five years ago."

"...!"

"He was the one behind this summer's murders. He was flaunting the deaths for you to see. And this part is my own fault—during our confrontation, I lost him."

Kuzuhara's fists tightened.

His heartbeat pulsed through his body, threatening to tear his eardrums apart. The beat grew faster and faster until it felt as though his heart was about to collapse.

With her eyes hidden, the girl continued.

Neither blaming him nor offering him comfort.

“He was lying low overseas for some time, but supposedly he’s coming back. Maybe he’s already on this island as we speak—”

Jun’s voice seemed to grow distant.

His reality was overwritten, his senses reliving the moment of fate.

The truth behind the two shots he fired.

He had aimed for the hand the first time, scared to take the man’s life. As for the second shot...

When he saw his foe take aim at him, out of terror he aimed at the center of the man’s body—that he could easily end his life. To kill him.

The man who had been afraid to kill had, a second later, fired a shot to take a life.

The result was one lost life.

A life that hadn’t even crossed Kuzuhara’s gaze.

A small girl who had not even existed in the world his senses captured.

By the time she leapt into his world, she was already a silent corpse.

Kuzuhara was once more caught in the nightmare of his past.



Chapter 2-A: Paw and Circumstance

Somewhere aboveground, in the Western District.

Well, that was a close shave.

The Guard Team's grasp on my movements just keeps improving. This almost never happens with anyone else.

...I guess that's natural, since most other people who've seen me move are dead.

They would have gotten me if that pile of junk hadn't collapsed. I would've made it out alive, probably. But not without a couple of deep injuries.

Today's just not my day.

No, I'm not saying the grenade was because I was unlucky. I was unlucky that I ran into the Guard Team. I just wanted to enjoy myself at the casino. Why are they so desperate to get me?

Because I'm a killer?

That can't be.

If you look at it that way, the Southeast Asian mafia in the Eastern District and the Chinese mafia in the West have a higher kill count. Or are they letting them off the hook because they're mafia too?

Then I think they could extend that favor to me, too.

I mean, I don't kill people to stuff my pockets.

I swear that I am more normal than them.

I am definitely normal.

They only want to be violent. Those gangs were formed to do bad things.

Mafia, yakuza, gangsters, they're all the same. They don't hesitate to turn to violence. That's why they're strong...and rich, probably.

And if you do go all-out as a gangster but still end up dirt-poor, you might as well get a proper part-time job to pay the bills.

Yes. That's right. Those people are not normal.

Here is my proof. Even though I was holding Miss Nazuna hostage, that Guard Team member threw the grenade at us. 'Evade', he said? That goes against every law of logic, morality, love, society, and evolution I know of!

Why...? Why is Miss Nazuna one of them?

She's too lovely to be in the Guard Team.

She knew I could kill her, but she was determined to fight nonetheless.

I think that's incredible.

It's awe-inspiring. Just like the heroes I saw on TV and in comic books growing up.

In spite of her wounds, she would have faith in her friends and defeat her enemies. Although it unfortunately happens that a simple misunderstanding cast *me* as her enemy, once we solve that trivial mistake we'll be able to smile together.

...But the Guard Team betrayed her.

If she had died then, I would never have forgiven them. Hm? But I was holding her, so there was no way she could have died. Because I am going to protect Miss Nazuna no matter what.

Or maybe I can't protect her. But I *believe* I can. Because having firm determination makes me stronger. Well, problem solved.

...Wait! That was close. I almost ended up forgiving the bad guys with a self-resolution again!

Right. The conclusion isn't the problem here.

The problem here is the fact that they tried to kill Miss Nazuna along with me.

...Wait.

Maybe Miss Nazuna told them beforehand, 'don't worry about me—kill us both if you have to!' Then...no no no no no no no no no. The old guy told her to evade!

In other words, they're awful people. The mafia is the crazy one, not me. But Miss Nazuna is one of them and chased me down, seeing me as an enemy—a killer. So in other words, I am a bad guy to the rest of this island, but because this island is the one that made me into the Killer Ghoul I am innocent and normal and therefore things should work out between Miss Nazuna and me.

Hm. I think I'm confusing myself.

In other words, there shouldn't have been any obstacles between us in the first place!

Huzzah! Now I can stand by her side!

...Wait. Then why are we on *opposite* sides again?

I...I'm on the right track, aren't I?

Sometimes these thoughts overwhelm me and I lose myself.

Maybe, I think, I'm the only crazy person in the world and everything else is normal.

Some people say that the world is made up of only what they can see, but I don't agree. Who knows? There just might be a heated workplace drama underway in the factory where the sneakers I wear were made.

...Wait. That's not right. That *is* something I can technically see. If I'm including cause and effect.

I don't know what kind of drama might have happened around this pair of sneakers, but I am looking at the sneakers that resulted from that drama.

Even the money in my wallet is there through a sequence of events I couldn't have seen, involving politicians or businesspeople and their hard work or corruption or sense of justice.

...But none of that is something I can see with my own two eyes.

An overwhelming majority of what takes place in the world is unknown to me.

And most of what supports the world I can see with my eyes are supported by actions I can't see.

...That scares me.

How does the world outside my scope of vision see me?

I am most definitely not insane.

It must be true, because I say so.

If the world is composed of everything I can think of...

Then my opinions couldn't be wrong. Because everything is my world.

But the world doesn't belong to me.

...I'm normal.

I'm normal. I'm okay. I'm still all right. It was all normal—my birth, my life, my childhood, my education, my fun memories, my disappointment, my enjoyment...

And now, I've fallen in love like a normal person.

I admit it. I'll finally admit it.

I love Miss Nazuna. I only became convinced of that today. The moment I caught her in my arms as she fell unconscious...I almost wanted to run off with her. But I didn't. I am not a stalker. I could never do such a thing while her heart hasn't come around to me.

That's why I left her with the most kind-looking people there...a foreign couple, I think.

I suppose the volunteer police must have retrieved her and taken her to a doctor. Or maybe the foreigners are letting her rest somewhere.

...All right. I'll try looking for the couple later.

Then, when I find Miss Nazuna...what am I supposed to say?

I think I should start by clearing up this misunderstanding. I am the Killer Ghoul; but I am only a killer because I am on this island. I have to explain that my status as a killer is the natural result of my being influenced by this unusual setting. Outside this island, I am a perfectly normal civilian. And I have something to brag about, though it's not much.

I'm a little confident in my dancing skills. I've done everything from breakdancing to ballroom dancing, to traditional Japanese dance to Noh. That's right. Come to think of it, before I came to this island I crossed over to Sado because I wanted to learn more about Noh. Of course, my favorite dances are tap-dancing and Beijing opera-style sword dancing—the flashy stuff—but right now...I'd love to try folk dancing with Miss Nazuna. Just like in good old elementary school, we could dance around a campfire in the middle of the school field and make memories together.

I once won a nationwide dance competition. I don't know if I have a talent for teaching, but I think I can at least show an example that's easy to learn from.

No. Actually, I don't even need to teach Miss Nazuna.

I'd be happy even if all she did was watch.

Because just being with her would satisfy me.

...Wait a second.

That's not it. That's not the issue here. The important thing is how to explain myself to Miss Nazuna.

I have to prove that I am normal.

Normalcy...well, first, you'd have to define the standard of normalcy, but I think being 'ordinary' is important. After all, the 'ordinary'—the majority—is becoming more and more important in society.

In that sense, all I ever did was ordinary. Studying, playing, going off quietly into my own thoughts...it was all ordinary.

I'm normal.

When I was little, I would always step on the white stripes on the crosswalk when I was crossing the road.

I'm normal.

I believed I could bend spoons with my mind, so whenever I watched a psychic on television I begged my parents to buy me a new spoon.

I'm normal.

In the end I never gained psychic powers and bent the spoon by force with a straight face, then showed off to my family and friends. It was only in junior high school that I realized that everyone already knew I was bluffing.

I'm normal.

I was the child who looked up at the sky and thought it would be fun to drop things from the clouds. So I decided to drop all the characters from my favorite anime from the sky.

I'm normal.

It occurred to me that it was about time for the Takecopter² to be invented.

I'm normal.

² A set of bamboo propellers on Doraemon's head that allows him to fly.

In the middle of the night, I curled up under the blankets. And I fantasized about taking a spare pocket from a blue cat-shaped robot into a different anime. With tools from the 22nd century, I would be invincible. And with my favorite villains at my side, I would mock the heroes.

I'm normal. I'm normal. I'm normal...

When I can no longer remember any more of my childhood, I refresh myself with a stretch.

The ruined buildings are full of life. I look up, standing between them. The sky between the grey walls is so blue.

Gazing into the narrow sky, I begin to think like a junior high student who thinks he knows everything, even though he hasn't taken a single step into the real world. 'Why do I exist?'

I've never actually taken a step into the real world.

...All the memories I looked back on are of my childhood.

I came over to this island before I finished high school...and I became the Killer Ghoul. A criminal, from the outside world's perspective. Someone who is clearly deranged.

I've never experienced real life. The only money I've ever earned for myself was the prize from the dance contest.

I was from a well-off family, and I could get my hands on most anything I wanted. But I wasn't coddled. If I went too far, I'd get a slap from Father. Mother would use her fists. But about three years later, I came to see that that was all my own fault.

But...the parents who would hit me are not on this island. A boy like me, who hadn't ever held down a real part-time job, has crossed over to an island where part-time jobs didn't exist.

How ironic. By the time I came to that realization, I'd already killed many people, and the island was awash with rumors about me being a mass murderer.

Not many people look at my face and go, 'hey, it's Yakumo Amagiri!' Although it's a different story with the Guard Team and the Eastern District's executives, who've seen photos of me.

'Yakumo Amagiri' is just a pseudonym.

On this island, I am the Killer Ghoul. When I return to the outside world someday, I have to leave behind the Killer Ghoul persona. In other words, 'Yakumo Amagiri' is the glue that holds my persona and the island together.

I don't need to reveal my real name on this island. It's possible to live on here without ever telling anyone your name, so 'Yakumo Amagiri' is enough for me.

With these thoughts I turn a corner in the narrow, tangled alleyways and immediately do a 180 as I stop.

For a split second I spot a silhouette in the direction I was walking from, looking as though it is spying on something.

The figure's eyes widen as they notice me hiding behind the corner, but escape is impossible. He cannot even scream. By the time he tries, my thumb is already stuck in his mouth as I grab his jaw with my fingers to drag him toward me.

A stranger.

He's a mess. Unnecessarily so. Even on this island you rarely run into people dressed like this. They say that inexperienced reporters from the mainland dress like this when they come to the island in an attempt to blend in. But it looks like he has no idea that it makes him stick out like a sore thumb. Poor thing.

I look over his face and try to figure out his age, but quit.

If he were a buxom lady, I would have stared all the way into the layers of her makeup, but I have no interest in scruffy men.

"...Why are you following me?"

"Gah..."

He must have had no idea I could have been lying in wait for him. His face twists in an instant, but not into fear—yet.

Did he follow me because he knows who I am? Or..

“Sorry. I’m actually the Killer Ghoul. So I think I’m going to kill you.”

“Huh...? K-Killa Ghoul...?”

I try to coax information out of him, but the man just shows a half-smile. I think he thinks I’m joking around.

So he doesn’t know who I am?

“W-wait. I washn’t hollowin you! It’s a hishunderstandin!”

I reach into his clothes and pull out a card-shaped digital camera.

“Ah...”

Anxiety flits over his face, but that doesn’t matter.

Because I am still holding his jaw with my right hand, I use my left to turn on the camera and check its contents—Bingo. Photos of me, no question.

Hm. Was this after I left Miss Nazuna at the junkyard? Did this bastard blend with the crowd and happen to find me there?

Oh well.

First, I have to blow off this anxiety.

“I don’t know why you were sniffing around like that, but to be honest...it bothered me. The way you were mousing around me.”

“W-wai—here we out!”

His pronunciation’s great for a guy whose jaw I’m holding.

But I’m not going to forgive him. I refuse to hear him out.

“Although if you were a rodent like Nejiro, I might have spared you.”

"N-Nejiro?"

"Hm? You've never heard of him? I see. You're new to this island, aren't you. Nejiro is king over the rats on this island. They're such tiny little rats. Those children, you know, are everywhere. It's a little different from being able to go anywhere. Me and people like Yua can get anywhere, but those rats are different. Those rats, you see, are *everywhere*. That's the important part. I'm emphasizing the *everywhere* because it's most important. They spread into every corner of the city to nibble away at people and even the island itself. They're some of the more annoying things around here. Although they're no problem for me. Their eyes look completely empty, but at the same time they're like mirrors. They reflect their leader Nejiro's eyes. Sad and lonely, but unable to see that that's what they look like themselves. I can't say I know what they're thinking. Just like you don't understand a Killer Ghoul like me, I don't understand rats. But it's strange. They look like rodents to me, so I never get the urge to kill them. Ghouls kill people, not animals."

I have to take breaths in between, but I try to keep up a machine gun pace.

I do that to make sure the pitiful man never has the chance to interject. So I would cut off his apologies and pleas and even his breaths.

At the end of my ramblings, the man is already silent.

He just stares at my jaw, trembling in fear and already having given up on thinking of escaping. Huh. I was just rambling while making eye contact. Why is he so scared? Maybe putting more and more pressure into my grip is having an effect.

Oh well.

I decide to give the man an opportunity and tell him a story that went around the island. The perfect story to teach him just what kind of a place this island is.

"All right. I'll tell you. The legend behind the poor, sweet rats that nest on this island. You should pray that I change my mind while I talk. That I change my mind about killing you. That's right. It was just about when the casino opened up in the Eastern District..."

"...and that's how Nejiro really became the Rat King. And they all lived happily for a while. Wow, what a relief. Isn't it great that he didn't die at the hands of that awful sharp-eyed Chinese witch?"

I didn't cry, but I put a lot of emotion into the telling. I embellished the story a little, but even I have to pat myself on the back for the scene where Yili strangles the Rats with her own hair.

But that's that, and this is this.

"I suppose I should kill you after all...hm?"

I look at the man, but he's gone. Huh. When did I let go of him? I don't remember.

Inconceivable! I must have gotten so absorbed in the story that I let the stalker escape.

"No way...he ran. I guess there's nothing I can do."

That's what my mouth says, but I don't *feel* that way.

I am furious with myself, but decide to give up.

I want to grind his bones to powder, but only crazy people would do that to someone who doesn't fight back.

...Damn it.

Something's not right.

Normally, I would have outrun someone like him and left.

But I went out of my way to catch him and even threatened him. That wasn't like me at all.

...Not good. Anger makes people hesitate.

And hesitation makes people strange. So for someone like me, who insists on a normal life, anger is not an option. Wait. Anger is an instinct born from evolution. Maybe trying to hold it back is abnormal? ...Actually, is anger even an instinctual emotion? I feel like it might be fundamentally different from things like fear or lust.

Not good. This is putting me on edge.

I should change my pace. Go meet someone. It might be best to meet someone and unwind before I go to see Miss Nazuna.

That's right...maybe I should visit Nejiro's haunt. The protagonist of that story I told.

I wonder how those mice are doing these days.

I think they hate me... r actually, they're scared of me. But I'm fond of them.

Reining in my endless anxiety, I move to leave the alley. But a moment later, a familiar voice reaches my ears and sends my anxiety levels through the roof.

<Hey there.>

...It is an agitating voice.

Yes. I *do* hear the infinitely agitating voice!

<Why so edgy? Try adding more calcium to your diet.>

That's right. I feel anxious because I hear this voice, or at least that's what I'll say is happening. I didn't actually hear this voice before, but I'll just pretend I did.

"...Shut up, Joplin."

Spring-heeled Joplin is no sane person, no matter how much I think about it.

He's supposedly a present-tense urban legend that people often mention alongside me.

He appears everywhere on the island to give advice to some and warnings to others.

From the way he talks I think he might be a foreigner, but it also kind of feels like he's doing that on purpose.

He is a fickle creature that points a starving runaway girl to a way out of the island's labyrinth, but at the same time leads curious reporters and their sort to the casino or the Pits to bring them to cruel ends.

I don't know how long he's been on this island, and I don't know why he's here.

And since rumors about his appearance are inconsistent, half the talk is probably just that. Rumors. ...Although in that case, the other half must be true.

There are a lot of theories about the true identity of Spring-heeled Joplin. From a crony of the Eastern District's boss to a Western District exec, to a pawn of a political faction from the mainland. But because less than half the island even believes he exists, I don't think any amount of theorizing is going to produce an answer.

He is this island's very own madness incarnate. Someone who's completely removed from common sense.

Getting involved is only going to mess with my head. This isn't good. I don't like this at all. The crazier someone is, the more normal they think they are or the more they convince themselves they're working for some great purpose, which makes them harder to deal with.

I try to ignore him, but his words won't stop assaulting my ears.

<The reason behind your anxiety is simple. You've known for a while that you were being watched, but the only ones you managed to catch so far were small fry like the one just now. The real pros still have their eyes on you.>

Thunk. I hear a pleasant noise.

Crushing the tin toy fixed with a radio that was rolling around my feet, I try to leave the alley—

"Meow."

...But a cat with a radio tied around its body strolls toward me.

<—eyes on you. Heh heh...that was cruel of you.>

Damn it! I can't bring myself to crush a *cat*!

It is a simple trick that utilizes my love of cats. I wouldn't have batted an eye about stomping on a rhinoceros or a cow!

"I suppose I should apologize to the tin toy artisan if I ever meet them."

<That would be me.>

"I'm so sorry that I'm wracked with guilt on the inside. Now go die."

Joplin lets out a muffled laugh.

<That's cruel of you. I'm on your side. See? I just lent you a helping hand.>

"What do you mean?"

I realize something, then.

The presences that had been slinking around me are all gone.

It is silent now, as if time's been stopped. It is just me and the cat.

"...The final twist better not be that all those people following me were actually your goons."

But I know that's not true.

Joplin would keep tabs on me even if he were alone, and he's not foolish enough for me to notice him. That means he must have somehow gotten rid of all the people who were tailing me. Judging from his personality, he's probably avoided violence and resorted to cajolery instead... or threatened them.

How does he do it? He *is* abnormal. But I have to admit, I'm glad to lose all those tails.

"Fine. I'm grateful for that. But why are strangers keeping tabs on me?"

<Heh heh heh...that's *your* homework. Use that passion for knowledge to drive you forward.>

...I feel angry. I should have seen this coming. I was an idiot for feeling grateful.

"Then why did you help me, I wonder?"

I don't expect a very specific answer, but Joplin betrays my expectations.

<I'm just doing what any fellow urban legend should be doing. I didn't want outsiders to figure out your identity.>

My identity? Oh. Something like, 'the boy who won the dance contest all those years ago was the Killer Ghoul'? But that's the other way around. Because I, the Killer Ghoul, am the mask. And without my mask—off this island—I can go straight back to being an ordinary young man.

I could explain, but this is such a long line of thought that I decide not to correct Joplin, instead continuing the conversation.

"...Even if outsiders figure out who I am, I'm the only one who'd lose anything. Although if my parents decided to commit suicide or something I'd try to stop them somehow."

<Heh heh. Whatever the case, it looks like we've got a mutual understanding going on here. Let's get along like good fellow urban legends! See, you and I are one and the same—we can only truly exist in an unusual environment like this island, and only in the rumors of the—>

I play with the cat, which seems to be used to humans, and untie the radio. Then I fling the chattering box against the wall.

The cat mews, frightened, and leaps away from me.

As soon as it disappears from sight, emptiness rises from my gut and presses against my heart. Being lonely also makes me afraid, but this sensation against my gut feels a little nice.

But there is no one here anymore I can share this emotion with.

No one.

Nothing is here.

It's empty. Everything is hollow.

To my eyes, the blue sky seems only like a symbol of nothingness.

...This is isolation.

It's very lonely.

I want to see Miss Nazuna.

But would I scare her if I come out of the blue?

Would she start thinking about me the way I think about Joplin?

Damn it...I'd rather die than be treated the same as that sick creep.

...Hm?

...I see.

I get it.

I realize something. I understand something.

It's because I'm a legend. Because I'm so unrealistic. That's why the Guard Team is itching to get rid of me. Because supernatural things like magic and myth are only a nuisance to those who want to enforce control over the people.

Maybe Miss Nazuna doesn't see me as human because I'm an urban legend. Yes. That must be it!

Then it's about time I told them.

It's time for me to tell those who control this island that my fangs can indeed pierce their necks.

It's about time for the island to know, I think.

That I am no legend, but a reality.

Chapter 2-B: Armchair Defective

Room 326 of the abandoned hotel. The Private Eye Lizard.

"Did you hear that, Sherlock Liverpool?! The Buruburu-y Airwaves is broadcasting the news outside...and they say a Western District executive has been murdered!"

"Buruburu's just replaying the same broadcast recording from before. Talk about lazy. I'm surprised the Western District's just letting the news play. Are they that forgiving, or are they just that confident?"

It had been a day since the explosion at the junkyard. The speakers inside the hotel were, as usual, playing the day's Sousei Airwaves broadcast.

News of the Western District executive's death had spread throughout the district and become the gossip of the day. The residents feared a repeat of the past summer's incident and the inevitable pressure from the organizations, but they seemed to be resting a little easier this time because of Kuzuhara's presence.

Although the executive's cause of death was not announced in detail, he had often appeared to the locals, and was a face of sorts for the organization. It would be impossible to hide his death. Or perhaps the Western District wanted the locals' cooperation in finding the killer.

Ignoring Sherlock as he analyzed the incident, Charlotte raised her mug of tea with a gleam in her eye.

"I smell a case!"

"Forget smelling—this *is* a case," Sherlock remarked. His sister chuckled and continued.

"Heh heh heh...this is our chance, Sherlock Liverpool. Our chance to let our name be known throughout the island!"

"You usually sound like a nice person, Charlotte, but sometimes you're just shameless."

"Wh-why do you say that?! The best way to mourn the lost is to capture the culprit as soon as possible! That is the *raison d'être* for us ace detectives."

"Sorry, my mistake. You're not shameless—you're an idiot."

"But Sherlock Liverpool!" Charlotte sniffled. But she quickly became calm, reminded of something, and turned her gaze to the bedroom further in.

"Come to think of it, she might be coming around soon."

"...Oh. You're right."

The Liverpool siblings' suite was one of the better ones in the hotel, and was essentially a small apartment. Though they had no kitchen there was a full bathroom, and the siblings each had their own room and a living room-slash-office for a relatively luxurious lifestyle.

Then again, the hotel had never been fully furnished, which meant that their tattered furniture was a poor match for the decor.

The hotel was a cheap place to stay compared to the mainland, but very few actually lived there. After all, those who could afford that much would not have to come to the island in the first place. And those who had the money to spare would have taken up residence at a bigger hotel run by an organization. In other words, this particular hotel was occupied by those who had some money, but were forced by circumstance to live on the island.

Of course, it was difficult to say that the Liverpool siblings had money at all.

In any event, there was a girl sleeping in one of the bedrooms.

The black-haired girl entrusted to the siblings the previous day by the mysterious young man.

They had rushed her to their room and brought in a back-alley doctor they knew for a check-up, but apparently the girl was not particularly hurt. She was simply exhausted and needed sleep.

"Anyway, I'm so glad she's all right. And I'm also glad we found a skilled doctor on this island!"

"All we know is that she's not critically injured, Charlotte. And sure, the doctor's good, but he doesn't have a license anymore since he illegally treated a gunshot wound on the mainland and got found out."

"Heh heh heh. Sherlock Liverpool. That the doctor treated someone illegally is only proof of his skill! After all, a quack would never have been able to pull off the treatment, and he would have been murdered for his failure!"

"...Now you're laughing in the face of the criminal underworld. We're doomed," Sherlock sighed loudly. "Charlotte, there's a fine line between helping and prying. Back on the mainland, no one would bring home a girl like her! We don't even know who she is."

"What else could we do? Only the mainland has police stations and hospitals."

"That's not the issue here."

"Hm? Th-then what *is* the issue? ...Ah, I see, Sherlock Liverpool! You're testing my detective's instincts! I see, I see."

Sherlock ignored his sister and glanced at the bedroom door.

Yet his thoughts were not with the girl sleeping there, but in his own past.

'Charlotte really is a hopelessly good person.'

It would not have been surprising for a girl of her looks to have been snatched by thugs and put through all kinds of misery before losing her mind to drugs and sold for the price of pork in the Pits. But Sherlock had always acted as her shield to prevent such a thing from happening.

He had not tried to stop her when she announced her intention to come to the island. After all, he knew she would make the journey on her own even if he forbade her. Follow all he liked, it would be too late by then.

That was how he found himself coming to the island with Charlotte.

Even after doing thorough research, on the island he remained on alert as he constantly kept his eyes out for danger and turned people's sights from Charlotte to himself or someone else.

Sometimes he even took part in near-crimes—or actual crimes—and dirtied his own hands in order to keep her safe.

It was obviously no easy task, and he did feel some guilt about what he had done.

And yet he continued to dirty his hands.

'Charlotte deserves to suffer once or twice for being completely oblivious to what I do for her sake. It'd be so much easier if I just left her alone.'

How many times had he thought that way?

But each time the idea came to mind, he ended up denying it.

Not only could he not imagine himself abandoning his sister, he also felt sick to his stomach when he actually pictured his sister thrown to the island's hoodlums.

That she was his only surviving relative was part of the reason, but Charlotte was special to him. She had always fought back with gusto when he was bullied by his peers. Even though she could have avoided involvement.

She had grown up with that personality completely intact.

Old habits die hard, it was said. But it was a marvel to see how she retained such a detrimental character even to adulthood.

'Maybe it's because I was always with her.'

Charlotte had watched her brother endure every joke and insult thrown in his direction. Perhaps that had become a frame of sorts along which she matured.

'If that's true...I couldn't possibly face Charlotte. She probably doesn't regret the way she turned out. I'm sure of that. Even if that personality ends up destroying her life. Does she not realize how unfortunate that is?'

The world might call her foolish or saintly.

But neither label mattered to Sherlock.

He was constantly chained by the thought that his stoic personality ended up defining Charlotte's life and the potential disasters in her future.

But he did not try to undo those chains.

'Because...I love her more than I feel guilty.'

Was his love a platonic one between siblings? Or something more?

Unable to tell which was which, Sherlock spent his days feeling something worse than guilt for his sister.

'Does she even know what I'm thinking?'

"Yes! That's it!"

"Whoa?!" Sherlock screamed as Charlotte slapped his shoulder, afraid that she'd read his mind.

"What's wrong, Sherlock Liverpool? ...Oh, I see now. You had something dirty in mind for our guest in the bedroom! You're finally growing up, I see. You're a man now! You may look innocent, but your thoughts are already deep down in the gu-"

"As if!"

Though Charlotte's guess was off, it was still in the same ballpark. A hint of emotion broke through Sherlock's poker face.

"So what were we talking about again?" Sherlock sighed. "Right. About what the issue is."

"The victim was stabbed with a knife made of their own frozen blood!"

"What are you talking about?"

"What *am* I talking about...?"

Charlotte's eyes flitted upwards as she searched her memories, before confusion seemed to take over and she trailed off quietly.

"Hmm...I thought of this and that and came to a conclusion...?"

"Is that supposed to be a question."

"B-but don't you think that was a prodigious solution to a mystery?"

"No. It'd be challenging enough to extract that much blood from the victim, and you'd be better off making a knife out of ice or dry ice." Sherlock replied, forcibly bringing sense into the conversation.

Charlotte thought for a moment, before clapping her hands and sending an admiring gaze her brother's way.

"Sherlock Liverpool...you're a genius!"

"And you're an idiot," Sherlock said, but the emotions he hid were more complicated than simple disdain.

He always put on a cold front to conceal his thoughts, but he wanted to be more open with Charlotte. He wanted to smile at her compliment.

But his sense of reason suppressed that desire, instead bringing an icy attitude to the surface.

'I'm always lying to Charlotte,' he thought masochistically, and silently let out a hollow laugh.

Meanwhile, Charlotte stared at her brother and wondered if she had said something uncomfortable, also quieting down.

A strange silence fell over the office, and when the siblings finally broke the awkward air the bedroom door squeaked open.

"Where...am I?"

Emerging from the room was the girl they had brought in after the previous day's commotion.

She looked at the siblings cautiously, but Charlotte beamed obliviously and ran over to her.

"You're awake! What a relief!"

“Ah...”

The girl—Nazuna Yukimura—opened her eyes wide at Charlotte’s childlike smile.

That a clearly caucasian girl was speaking fluent Japanese was surprising enough, but the pure and innocent smile the girl wore—the girl who was about her own age—was even more surprising.

When she opened her eyes in an unknown place, Nazuna was convinced that she was in captivity. So she kept an ear on the conversation outside, and once she was sure that she could take on the man and woman in the living room, she had stepped out.

She was still alive because they still had some use for her. All she had to do was interrogate the foreigners for their motives and contact the Guard Team.

That was why she was completely thrown off-track by Charlotte’s smile.

Nazuna knew from the view out the window that she was still on the artificial island, but she tensed anyway. She had almost never seen anyone on the island dressed in such clean clothes but had a perfectly sincere and guiltless face.

The caucasian girl was like a sheltered flower. A sheltered flower that jumped straight into conversation without waiting for Nazuna to recover from her daze.

“Oh, my name is Charlotte. Please call me Lottie! This here is my brother Sherlock. And you are...?”

Nazuna was silent.

Would it be all right to tell them her name?

She scrutinized Charlotte’s face for a moment, unable to keep up, but Charlotte seemed to assume that Nazuna was still out of it.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere? Is your head okay?”

“You’re the one who’s not all right in the head, Charlotte,” Sherlock remarked. Charlotte turned beet red.

"N-n-no, that's not what I meant! I was just wondering if you didn't hurt your head!" Charlotte explained, waving her hands. Sherlock buried his face in his hands and turned away.

Nazuna looked back and forth between the girl waving her arms and the boy who was supposedly her brother but pretended not to know her, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nazuna Yukimura. It's nice to meet you."

She held out her right hand.

"...I see. So you brought me here and even called a doctor."

"Yes. I'm very sorry. We had no way of identifying you, so before we knew it..."

"It's all right. It's my fault for not having a cell phone or any identification with me. Thank you so much. I mean it. I promise I'll repay you one day," Nazuna said with a bow, once Charlotte's explanation was complete.

The siblings' actions had been completely pointless, as the Guard Team would have retrieved Nazuna if they had left her at the junkyard. But Nazuna showed no hint of annoyance and expressed only sincere gratitude.

Having met so many crazy characters in the Guard Team, Nazuna was not doubtful in the least when the strange duo introduced themselves as detectives.

Not only that, other than asking for her name the siblings did not pry any further into Nazuna's business. The brother seemed to be concerned, but the sister was completely oblivious.

The brother was probably the better detective, but he was probably keeping silent for his sister's sake, Nazuna concluded. She thanked them once more.

"...I've been going through a lot recently. I must have been so tense in the past few days that I just fell right asleep. Thank you for even letting me use a bed."

"Please, don't mention it!"

"But wouldn't one of you have had to sleep on the couch or the floor?"

"Not at all. I just slept with my brother!"

Nazuna and Sherlock stiffened simultaneously.

"Just kidding!"

"Enough joking around, Charlotte," Sherlock said firmly. There was a smile painted on his face, but his hands were trembling.

"Oh? But Sherlock Liverpool, we slept together until we were in elementary school. Under the same blanket until we were in kindergarten."

"Argh...does *nothing* embarrass you, Charlotte?!" Sherlock groaned, clutching his head. Charlotte smiled at the reversal. Nazuna was once more surprised.

The siblings explained that they had been on the island for a year now. The fact that Charlotte could live such a laid-back life meant—although Kuzuhara and his peacekeeping of the Western District might have been a factor—that Sherlock must have worked all the more for her sake.

Though the personalities were different, Nazuna was reminded of the captain of the Guard Team and a certain casino employee.

But soon, a slight shadow came over Charlotte's smile.

"Actually...about that man who carried you to us..."

The man who had left Nazuna to the siblings.

She had been unconscious then, but the explanation from earlier made it easy to guess. In fact, there was only one name that rose to mind.

Yakumo Amagiri.

The man who had been twisting her arm in the seconds before she lost consciousness. The Killer Ghoul who occasionally stirred up trouble in the Eastern District's casino.

He had clashed with the Guard Team several times already, but normal islanders thought he was simply an urban legend. And even considering the Liverpool siblings' occupation, they were still very much normal people. So

rather than wonder why Yakumo Amagiri rescued her, Nazuna decided to first keep the siblings out of trouble. She put on her best poker face, which she had learned as she worked on the Guard Team.

"I can't really say until I get a good look at his face. Although I need to thank him, too."

That was how she wanted to wrap things up.

After all, normal islanders were better off not knowing about him.

With that, Nazuna made to say goodbye and leave—

"W-wait! I only noticed after my brother mentioned it, but I think this person might be him!"

"...?"

Before Nazuna could speak, the detective began rummaging through her pockets.

"Charlotte."

Sherlock tried to stop her, but it was too late. Charlotte pulled a photograph from her coat pocket and held it out to Nazuna.

Nazuna felt her breath catch in her throat.

He was a little younger, but the subject of the picture was clearly Yakumo Amagiri.

'Where'd she get this picture?' She wanted to ask, but her mind quickly stopped her.

How did the siblings know about Yakumo Amagiri?

The photo must have been taken years ago, and from the background it must have been taken on the mainland.

But if Nazuna began to pry, she would end up having to confess her connection to the man.

She considered that Charlotte was testing her, but she quickly remembered that the self-proclaimed detective did not look the type to pull such a trick. She would have been less awkward if that had been the case.

Then, Nazuna deduced, the siblings were searching for Yakumo for a job. They were headed straight into the jaws of death.

"...Hm. I don't think I've ever seen him before. I'm sorry."

"I see..." Charlotte sighed, deflating. Nazuna finally said goodbye.

"Anyway, I'll be going now. Could I get your number? I'd like to thank you properly next time."

"Oh, of course!" Charlotte smiled again, and took out a business card from the same pocket as the photograph.

Nazuna also smiled as she took the card, for the first time allowing the truth to surface.

"Thanks. I don't have a business card or anything, but I do something like mercenary work in the Eastern District. I could help you out if I have time. If you ever need me, go to the management office at the Eastern District's theme park and we can get in touch."

"Thank you! Forget work, next time we can meet up for a scrumptious meal!" Charlotte said, innocent as a child.

Nazuna responded with a sincere smile and left the office.



Several minutes later. Aboveground, the Western District.

"Charlotte. Just out of curiosity...do you *like* that guy?"

"Eek?!"

The Liverpool siblings were just finishing up lunch after Nazuna's departure.

Just as Charlotte was about to resume investigating the subject of the photo, Sherlock took her by surprise.

"...You can't go falling for some punk whose name we don't even know. The fact that he's even on this island means he's probably a piece of shit. ... Though I guess the same goes for us, though."

"Wh-what are you saying, Sherlock Liverpool?"

"Last night, when I mentioned how the guy we met looks like the one in the picture, you ended up staring at him for ages. And the way you showed it to Nazuna back there, too. It's written on your face."

"By god...to think I'd been living with an ace detective all this time!" Charlotte uttered, trembling. Sherlock continued.

"Also, did you realize? When Nazuna talked about the theme park in the East..."

"Oh, the Guard Team?"

Her answer was immediate.

This time, it was Sherlock's turn to be stunned.

He managed to hide his shock with a look of slight surprise, but he quickly caught himself and answered.

"So you knew."

"Of course. I'm a walking encyclopedia when it comes to the island's facilities. I can describe the underground wrestling ring and the casino in perfect detail!"

"You didn't sound like it when you were talking to her just now. Nazuna's a part of the Guard Team, Charlotte. How do you talk to one of the Eastern District's attack dogs like nothing is wrong? Weren't you scared?"

"Hm? But Nazuna is a good person," Charlotte simply replied.

'Charlotte's just too naive. She's too innocent and trusting to be a detective.'

"Charlotte. You're...not really detective material."

The thought had been on his mind for a very long time, but once again he put words to the sentiment and said them to his sister. He had to make the thought tangible if he wanted to understand where he stood.

"Charlotte. You're just like Little Red Riding Hood."

"Oh, that's so sweet of you! But I'm not really that cute, Sherlock Liverpool."

"That's not what I meant."

Stopping in place, he decided to shatter his sister's smile.

"You're a hopeless idiot who couldn't even figure out that the Big Bad Wolf took your grandmother's place! This island's full of wolves; how can someone who can't tell one apart from family, even after looking at the eyes and ears and mouth, ever dig up people's lies and secrets? One of these days, the wolves are going to tear you to pieces! And I don't want that to happen to you!"

He let himself get carried away on his emotions, blurting out his honest feelings in the process.

Sherlock quickly looked away, but it seemed Charlotte had failed to grasp the implications of his confession.

She simply responded with a gentle smile.

"I'm not scared at all to be Little Red Riding Hood."

"Why not?"

"Even if I'm eaten by the Big Bad Wolf, I know that you'll become the hunter and rescue me."

"...!"

It was a sweet but cruel conclusion.

"...I'm just joking, Sherlock Liverpool. I won't cause you *that* much trouble. But I think it's about time you found a lady you *really* want to go that far for."

Charlotte's smile beat Sherlock's poker face by a long shot, and it was impossible to tell just how much she was being serious. Worse still for him, Charlotte was not being mean-spirited in the least.

The more he thought, the deeper and deeper he fell into a bottomless pool. Sherlock forced himself to be calm and changed the subject to escape.

"...Anyway, what do we do today? We can't exactly tail him again. How about we ask the volunteer police what happened after the explosion? They might know something. It'll leave a bad aftertaste if we gloss over it without knowing what happened."

"Hm...I suppose you're right. But there's someone I'd like to meet before that."

Sherlock gave a quizzical look. Charlotte puffed up her chest and revealed her plans.

"Heh heh heh...they say that every investigation begins with legwork. And do you know who on this island does the most legwork of anyone? She's practically a regular on Buruburu Airwaves these days."

"Yua Kirino, you mean? The one who's always around at Iizuka's restaurant in the underground?"

"Exactly! She's supposed to have scoured the island from East to West, all the way down to the Pits. If we show her the photograph, she'll tell us for sure! Heh heh heh. How do you like my ace deduction?"

"That's not a deduction, Charlotte," Sherlock sighed as he usually did, relieved that things had quickly gone back to normal.

And so, Charlotte took her brother to Iizuka's restaurant.

With no idea about what was happening on the island.

Without a clue in the world that she was approaching the center of an ominous disaster.



The Western District. In front of the abandoned hotels.

It was a little earlier.

Having said goodbye to the Liverpool siblings, Nazuna cautiously left the premises.

When the winter sun shone into her face, she found herself narrowing her eyes. But she did not slow on her way to the Eastern District.

'A civilian detective is looking for Yakumo Amagiri.'

The fact had unsettled her, compelling Nazuna to leave the office as quickly as she could.

'But maybe I should have asked some questions?'

Nazuna would have been free to ask; but Sherlock would probably not have let Charlotte discuss anything about their client or the subject. Sherlock seemed relaxed around his sister, but Nazuna still remembered clearly the sharp glint that flashed in his eye when Charlotte took out the photograph.

The detective agency's revenue probably depended mostly on Sherlock, Nazuna concluded. Otherwise they could never afford such a luxurious home.

They had been on the island for a year, they had said. One year was not the kind of time simple tourists would spend for the island.

They must have come to the island for a specific mission. But what if their mission involved the man in the photograph—Yakumo Amagiri?

The Guard Team was after Amagiri because he had repeatedly committed murders in the casino and the Eastern District. There were other reasons as well, but the executives had ordered that he be captured alive.

Carlos and the others speculated that Gitarin might want to make Amagiri a Guard Team member, but Jun would probably not consent, as the Killer Ghoul had taken her friend hostage many times.

'I wouldn't agree, either.'

She did wonder why Yakumo did not kill her then. And why he left her to the siblings.

But whatever the circumstances, the idea of befriending a man who did not even blink at murdering several people in a day was nothing short of insanity.

"I let my guard down yesterday. But I swear...next time..."

Clenching her fists, she suddenly realized that her waist felt lighter than usual.

'Where'd my sword go? Those two didn't mention it, and it wasn't in the bedroom...maybe the others picked it up.'

She wasn't particularly attached to the sword, but it was uncomfortable to lose her weapon on the island. If it were a gun, it would have been quickly used in another crime and the blame pinned on her.

The organizations of the island had crime scene investigators of sorts in their employ. Tracing guns through ballistic markings was a simple task.

'Anyway, I have to get back to the office and let everyone know I'm all right.'

Once she passed through the aboveground area littered with abandoned buildings, the theme park would be close by.

If things had gone according to plan, there would have been a straight road leading down to her destination. However, illegal buildings and trashed cars stood in heaps, making travel more difficult. But there were winding paths people used by locals, and Nazuna could just go along them.

But just as she stepped into the Eastern District, several people called to her.

"Well, lookee here."

"What's the rush, lady?"

A group of young people in relatively trendy clothing approached her as she walked alone.

Nazuna had not gone through something like this in a while. She snickered to herself and kept walking.

"Hey, hold it right there. We're *talking* to you, you hear?"

"We gotta crash here cause the volunteer cops won't give us a break over westside, y'know."

"Which is why we need a little favor...physically speaking, I mean."

"We'll pay off the interest physically too, if you catch my drift."

"You listening? Don't just walk away like that."

"You're gonna make us cry."

'Come to think of it, Jun says she gets hounded like this at least once a week.'

She thought of the Guard Team's leader—a shy, fragile girl by all appearance—but did not stop walking.

"Hey, I told you to—argh!"

Just as the man reached for Nazuna's shoulder, a red line appeared on his face—just above his eyelid. Dark red blood scattered in an instant and his vision quickly turned red, then black.

Without even slowing down Nazuna spoke to the two others.

"Sorry. But you guys are getting annoying. If you try that again, I'm just going to take out your eyes and weak points."

In her hand was a small knife she had stuck in her belt. Though she was without her katana Nazuna had not lost any of her other weapons.

"H-how the hell?!"

Nazuna didn't know if the siblings had not noticed the weapons or if they had simply decided to ignore them. Either option seemed fitting for Charlotte and Sherlock, she concluded, and walked away without even looking back at the men.

She heard their cries, followed by a typical howl of "you'll regret that, bitch!" as they ran across scattered piles of junk.

"Running off because of a little cut to the face? I can't believe they made it to the island," Nazuna chuckled bitterly, sticking the knife near her buckle.

There wasn't so much as a drop of blood on the blade that had drawn a line across the man's face. Though he had taken her by surprise, she had countered with enough speed to send the blood flying clear off the blade.

With that speed, she could probably have blinded him completely barehanded. She could even have severed his carotid artery with her fingernails if necessary. Having spent so many years on the Guard Team, she was fully prepared to take such actions.

"...Then again, people like Lottie are on this island, too. But I can't believe this happened as soon as I stepped across the border. I wish the boss would make a volunteer police force here, too," she mumbled, and resumed walking in silence.

But at some point, she heard footsteps drawing near.

"...What, did you bring a gun this time?"

Thinking to take out her anger at losing to Yakumo the previous day, Nazuna turned to face her unfortunate victim.

And at that moment, she felt her body boil to the freezing point.

"Hey there."

The man standing there waved, his voice slightly tense.

The face of the island's most atrocious killer—Yakumo Amagiri—was tinged a faint red.

The childlike smile on his face was the very same one she had seen on the photograph.

There was deep darkness. In the still silence, a tepid air wafted like kelp in the sea.

In the darkness, its silence only sometimes broken by a draft, a new sound emerged.

Squeak.

Squeak.

Squeak.

The sharp and empty sound of friction, like the cry of a bat.

Then, something stirred in the shadows.

There was a *clunk* as light seeped into part of the space, and the darkness filling the tepid air was forced aside.

But the space was not fully illuminated. A dim shadow cast itself on everything but the slice touched by light.

The moment the squeaking stopped, a wheelchair appeared on the edge of light and shadow. Fully in the light, however, stood a lone girl.

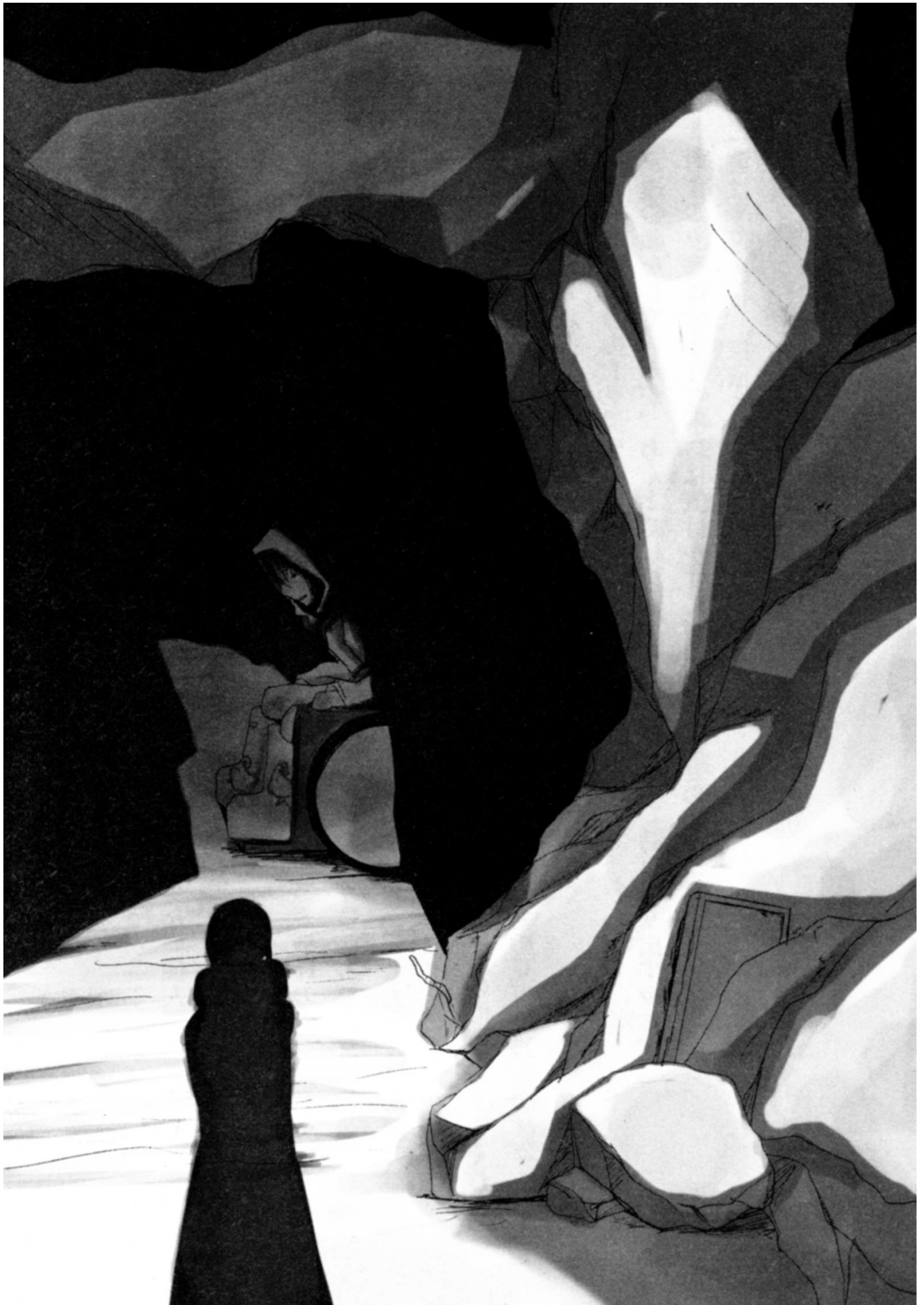
In the wheelchair was a boy in dark clothing. There were casts on both his legs, with pictures of rats scribbled on them.

Both children were probably around late elementary school-age or early middle school-age. Signs of maturity were developing in spite of their small statures.

Other children seemed to stir in the dark as well, but it was difficult to see them.

“Oh...hi there, Yua.”

“Hi, Nejiro. How are your legs?”



"A lot better. Thanks to these guys here."

The boy's name was Nejiro.

He was the king of the Rats, an unusual street gang composed of children who grew up on the island.

The girl's name was Yua Kirino.

She was one of the few residents of the decrepit island who lived a life of optimism. A visionary who wandered the ever-changing labyrinth of the island in an attempt to create a complete map.

She was not one of the Rats, but she began to meet with them after that summer, when she rescued Nejiro after he was left to die with his legs broken. But that did not mean she worked with their gang. She received the Rats' help in her mapping adventures. Her accurate maps, which even indicated detours and back alleys, were a great help to the Rats—and if they were to get their hands on the maps before the organizations that controlled the districts, the maps would become an invaluable tool for leverage.

"What is it?" Nejiro asked coolly, though he wore the face of her friend. Yua did not seem to mind.

"Actually...a couple of detectives came to see me today."

"Detectives?"

"Yeah. A white lady and her brother."

"Oh. Charlotte and Sherlock."

Nejiro seemed to know the detectives. Yua smiled, knowing her job would be easier.

"So what about them?"

"Well...they want me to help them find someone. I have a picture of him here..."

"Let's see," Nejiro said, curious.

He was just putting on an act, keeping in regular contact with Yua for her valuable information. Nejiro would not change so easily. The past summer's incident seemed to have strengthened the bonds between him and the Rats, but the fundamentals of his character would remain to adulthood.

"So...here. This person in the picture."

"Here. Let me have a look..." Nejiro took the picture, a mask-like smile on his face.

But things quickly changed.

The mask was instantly torn as shock spread over his face, almost enough to make it look like Nejiro was about to stand from his wheelchair.

"...This is...it's Yakumo..." He uttered without thinking, but quickly caught himself and turned to Yua.

"You know him, Nejiro?!"

Yua was unsettled by Nejiro's shock. She must have been torn on whether or not to ask any further when she saw his reaction. But Nejiro hung his head in the darkness, hiding his face from Yua. Even the presences blending around him quickened, matching Nejiro's mood.

"Yua...don't ever get *near* this guy!"

"Wha..."

"Tell the detectives you didn't find anything! Okay?"

He was being unusually forceful, but Nejiro was clearly worried for Yua's sake.

"...I'm sorry. Yua. I'll tell you the details once I get my thoughts together. But this guy's bad news. It's a matter of life or death. Just remember that."

Yua seemed to understand. She did not pry any further.

"All right. I'll be careful."

"Yeah...if anything happens, call Mr. Kuzuhara for help."

Though angry at his powerlessness, he tried to soothe Yua by mentioning the name of her guardian and the so-called protector of the Western District.

"Because we can't do a thing against this monster."



Once Yua had left, Nejiro raised his head and slowly spoke to the darkness around him.

"Guys...could you close the window?"

He had scarcely finished his sentence by the time the light seeping inside was cut off. Afterwards was left the same darkness as before, a murky air wafting through the shadows.

"That was Yakumo Amagiri...I know it was."

At the same time, the figures that had been silent when the light shone began to add their toneless voices to the silence.

"Yakumo?"

"Amagiri."

"Oh, the Killer Ghoul."

"I heard he's a murderer."

"I see. A murderer."

"A murderer, huh."

"Wow."

"Incredible."

"He killed a lot of people in the Eastern District."

"And the Pits."

"He's fast."

"Yeah. He's really fast until he kills people."

"He's fast and quick."

"Yeah."

"He's quick to decide to kill."

"He's fast at killing."

"I've seen him."

"Yeah. I've seen him."

"I don't really know what he does."

"But before you know it, the enemies are dead."

"Enemies?"

"They're enemies?"

"He only kills enemies."

"Really?"

"Maybe."

"I see."

"Right."

"He kills in a lot of different ways."

"He shoots."

"He slits throats."

"He gouges out eyes."

"He uses rocks."

"He poisons."

"There's nothing Amagiri can't do, huh."

"Incredible."

"More incredible than Nejiro?"

"Maybe?"

"What do you think?"

"Say, Nejiro. what do you think?"

The voices of the boys and girls would never stop.

At the end of the pointless round, the children—the Rats—tested their king.

"Sure, I can keep all of you alive..."

The king put on a self-deprecating smile and uttered a simple truth.

"...but when it comes to fighting and killing, that monster's on another level altogether."

For a time, murky silence ruled the darkness. But the seemingly endless air of stillness quickly disappeared, and the voices began to stir the shadows once more.

"I see."

"Then Nejiro is incredible."

"Killing people doesn't get you a place to sleep."

"Really?"

"If you kill someone, it makes more space on the island."

"No, it just makes you more enemies."

"Really?"

"That's annoying."

As the conversation continued, a light shone near Nejiro's chest and the vibration of a cell phone shook the darkness.

Nejiro frowned at the caller ID—'Unknown'—but slowly brought it to his ear.

"...Hello?"

His usual blank mask covered his face. There was nothing childlike in his attitude.

"...Who is this?"

But something shook that mask.

"...No...it can't be!"

And finally, the mask was shattered.

Nejiro went silent when he heard the voice, like a child caught red-handed in the middle of a prank. Or perhaps more like a debtor caught by the yakuza in the middle of an escape attempt.

"I understand..."

With deep determination for his life and those of his friends, Nejiro mustered a voice from the depths of his throat as his healing legs trembled.

"So...what do you want me to do, Mr. Kanashima?"



...

Heh heh...heh heh heh heh... Interesting. Very interesting.

I thought Nejiro was supposed to have a perfect poker face.. But to think he'd let it break in fear of Kanashima...and that he'd let it slip in front of this girl named Yua.

So there is still a fragment of childhood left in him. I am somewhat relieved.

This is Spring-heeled Joplin contacting Spring-heeled Joplin. Can you hear me? Do you hear my voice?

Things are getting interesting. Things here are getting very interesting.

Are we in for even more twists and turns now?

Tell me, Spring-heeled Joplin.

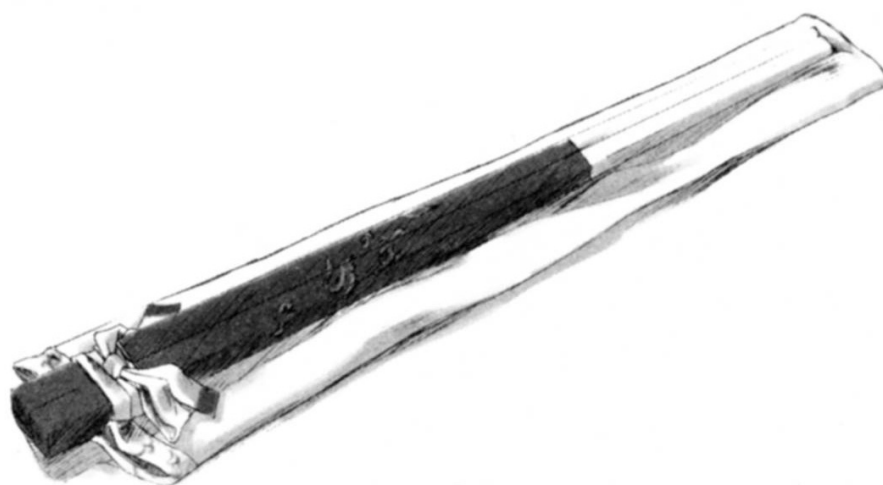
Roger that, Spring-heeled Joplin.

But let me correct you on one point.

Things aren't getting interesting.

This island itself has always been interesting—

From the very beginning.



間奏3 『西の良き鬼女』

Interlude 3: The Good Demoness of the West

The Witch of the West does not dream.

She does not remember her dreams, for her instincts know that what is not real is meaningless.



The Western District. The top floor of the Grand Ibis Hotel.

“Now, my children. Let us begin.”

In fluent Chinese, the elderly man at the center of the table announced the beginning of the meal.

There was an unfortunate hotel in the Western District that had been abandoned not long after being fully furnished. It was the Grand Ibis Hotel, which now acted as the massive fortress of the organization that controlled the Western District.

The top floor was originally intended to be a five-star Chinese restaurant.

The decor and the furnishings, and even the original role of the space had been fully preserved.

The top floor, used as a banquet hall for the executives, was both majestic and elegant to behold. But when the meal began, the refined air immediately transformed into explosive tension.

All kinds of *gi* (議) took place over the course of the feast.

審議—Deliberation.

評議—Review.

商議—Discussion.

詮議—Inquiry.

協議—Agreement.

密議—Concealment.

和議—Reconciliation.

謀議—Conspiracy.

Slowly but surely the Western District was shaped by the flows of the many *gi* presented over the course of the meals.

Like dividing food across a round table, the council discussed profits, territory, and sometimes even weighed human lives.

All those seated at the table were equally granted such rights. And once more the curtains rose on a banquet over the island's fate.

With flowing movements the elderly man who opened the feast reached over and plucked a piece of jellied shark with his chopsticks.

Noting that the eldest person at the table had begun, the people on his right and left reached for their food as well.

They were followed by the people next to them, who were followed by the people next to them.

The elegant wave traveled down the circumference of the table, indicating the standings of those seated there.

When the wave reached the halfway mark, the woman whose turn it was to begin picked up a teacup rather than food.

Her *qipao* was completely white save for the breast, which was blood-red. She looked almost like a lily in bloom.

Every man and woman at the table was Asian. It was as though a slice of China had been placed to match the room.

The woman in question, whose fair skin and blue eyes stood out from the rest of her brethren, cast a glance at an empty seat at the table.

Like a missing tooth, one seat had been left empty at the table seating over a dozen. And as though on cue, the man sitting directly opposite the woman in white spoke.

"It seems nothing can disturb you out of your leisurely sips of tea, Yili."

Yili's eyes fluttered upwards at the quip.

Reflected in her eyes was a man with razor-sharp eyes and a tattoo that went up his neck, all the way to his face.

He was perhaps a little older than Yili. The man, carrying himself with dignity in spite of his youth, raised the corners of his mouth as he addressed his equal in the organization.

"It is indeed *moving* to see you mourning so openly for our departed brother-in-arms, Yili."

"If you have time for sarcasm in the midst of mourning, you may need some time to hone your refinement and elegance, Elder Brother."

"Are your blue eyes mere decorations that they cannot see the grief in my heart?"

It was a racist remark toward his half-sister, who was part-British. But Yili was unaffected.

"Please, Elder Brother. Even *decorative* eyes are more than enough to see you clearly."

"How dare you..."

With the smile still locked on his face, the man shot a glare at Yili.

The lower executives tensed at the siblings' argument, but those higher seemed indifferent.

"Now, now...siblings are supposed to get along, you two..." Said Taifei Liu, one of the executives, between bites of food. He was seated closer to the old

man than the siblings, but he was technically not much more powerful than they.

Fitting for his name, Taifei was a rotund man. His balloon-shaped body stuck out like a sore thumb at the round table, like it or not.

"Self-control is a virtue, Taifei. You would do well to remember this the next time you feel the urge to intrude on an argument."

"Self-control? ...Mhm. I've already decided to eat whatever I like and die young rather than hold myself back and live a long life. ...Wow, the jellied shark is great today. Wonder if this is a special occasion," Taifei said, deflecting the insult and lowering his chopsticks to look at the siblings. "We're not gathered here today to listen to you two bickering."

"Indeed," said a deep but clear voice. It was the old man who had opened the feast. "Lihuang. Yili. Swallow your vexatious words along with your food and keep them in your own bellies."

The elderly man at the center of the table—Ei *Daren*—was the head of the mafia that controlled the Western District.

Though the group had abandoned their name when they crossed over from China, the core remained fast connected to one of the many large organizations on the mainland.

Half the executives gathered at the table were children of Ei *Daren*. Ei was over 60 years old at this point, but he had a whopping 24 children in total, counting the non-executives. And though from different mothers, Lihuang and Yili were Ei's children as well.

"...Of course, Father."

"...Apologies, Father."

The siblings expressed their regrets without even blinking.

And until the end of the meal, Lihuang and Yili did not once look gazes.

Once the siblings were quiet, the old man solemnly but languidly put his hands on the table and turned to the brother.

"But let me say this, Lihuang."

The tattooed man withdrew all hints of a smile from his face.

"To ridicule the eyes your sister received from my wife is to ridicule my wife as well."

"...Father. I did not intend such a thing..." Lihuang trailed off, acknowledging that he had gone too far, but he did not seem repentant in the least.

Ei did not chastise him further, instead addressing the entire table.

"The color of your eyes. The color of your skin. They are but trivial differences. Even among people of the same race, you will find failures and prodigies. A people group is most beautiful in a state of chaos. Just like this very island. It is a disorderly mix of races, ideologies, principles, and morals—a work of art teetering dangerously on a small, artificial piece of land," Ei *Daren* remarked, as though reflecting on his own life. "But there seems to be a demon that intends to destroy that balance."

Everyone but Taifei stopped mid-meal and turned their attention to Ei and the empty seat.

"Apologies, sir. We've yet to discover the—"

"I know who the culprit is," Ei said, interrupting the executive. "Although I cannot say who is standing *behind* this culprit."

Hushed murmurs filled the table the moment Ei's words became clear.

The entire island already knew that one of their executives had been killed.

But there had been no witnesses, and the cause of death had been stabbing—too common a cause to leave behind meaningful evidence.

"Last night...I discovered a man standing at my bedside. I speak not in metaphors or jest. A man had *single-handedly* infiltrated my *bedchambers* in the *dead of night*."

"What?!"

The bodyguards behind Ei were even more surprised than the executives. They exchanged glances, confirming silently that that had seen nothing out of the ordinary.

"...I also assumed it was but a dream. Until I heard of our comrade's death this morning."

"Who was that man?"

No one doubted Ei's story.

"It was my first time seeing his face as well, but I have heard rumors of him. I'd always hoped he were simply an urban legend. But now..."

His gaze floated upwards as he slowly recounted what transpired the previous night.

"He mocked the failings of the Western District's security and declared, 'Acknowledge me'. Prattled *nonsense* about making his name known throughout the island to make his existence real...and when I asked him who he was, he answered thus."

A mysterious smile dug wrinkles into the old man's face.

"My name is Yakumo Amagiri', is what the smiling fiend told me."



The *gi* coupled with lunch came to an end, and Taifei—who had polished off every last dish on the table—turned to Yili.

"Ah, that was great. —Yili?"

"Hm? What is it, Taifei?"

The Western District was infamous for its infighting—even among the relatives in its midst—but Taifei was one of the few neutrals among the executives. Though he did not benefit greatly from his position, his neutrality gave him the advantage of protecting him from the conflicts within the group.

As a result, Yili neither disliked him nor went out of her way to speak with him. Taifei also maintained his neutrality by not befriending any executive in particular, simply doing whatever tasks were given to him.

"Remember, y'know, Kugi?"

Yili was not expecting to hear that name. She froze.

"You asked me what happened to him afterwards, right? Apparently he wandered around a lot after they dropped the case. And he came back to Sado recently."

In the organization, Taifei dealt with external intelligence.

Even amidst all the infighting, the intelligence department went neglected because of its middling profits. So Taifei managed to avoid being forcibly dragged into any of the factions.

Because Taifei also received information on Sado and Niigata's police forces, Yili had discreetly asked him for information on a certain young man who had once been her subordinate.

"...Knowing they dropped the charges was enough, Taifei."

"I wasn't going out of my way to look for him or anything, though. He just happened to show up on my radar. So I thought I should tell you. Mhm."

"I see. Thank you." Yili smiled faintly. "But he has nothing to do with me anymore. So you don't have to investigate him further," she said, her expression icy. A soft, emotionless look rose to Taifei's round face.

"I'm not too sure about that."

"...What do you mean?"

"Well...I looked into things. And this is just a hunch, but he might be coming back."

Taifei had nothing more to say, it seemed. Yili said nothing, but he turned his round back to her.

"Well, I'm off to get dessert."

As the large man left for the kitchen, Yili departed the restaurant as though nothing had happened. Her steps were quicker, and a glint of emotion she had suppressed during the meeting had risen to her eyes.

Remembering the name of the man who once pretended to be her lover.

Seiichi Kugi.



<Hey there.>

“...I’m hanging up.”

<Whoa, I only got two words in. Heh. Looks like it’s back to etiquette lessons for Mushanokouji ZANJI Valand Ferro Gitarin ne zo Atsumori. So why don’t we take our time getting friendly over a meal sometime—>

Click.



<Don’t you think it was at least a *little* inconsiderate of you to hang up like that?>

“You want people to suspect that I’m in league with the Eastern District?”

<What? No. That’s impossible. Unless you were trying to catch another exec in a trap. Speaking of which, are you and your brother still at each other’s throats? That won’t do. Family is important.>

“...I’m hanging up.”

<Oh, wait. Wait. I’ve actually got something serious to discuss. I thought it’d be best to talk to the Western District exec I trust the most.>

"...So what does the boss of the Eastern District want with a lowly Western District executive?"

<First off, you have my sincerest condolences for your loss. This is related to your exec's untimely death.>

"I'm listening."

<We lost one too, the other day.>

"That's the first I've heard."

<We managed a swift cover-up while the radio announced *your* news to the island.>

"The timing couldn't have been more perfect, no?"

<No surprise there. We're the ones who leaked your side's death to Buruburu Airwaves.>

"How dare you!"

<Anyway, any ideas about the killer so far?>

"...No. Not yet."

<Aha. Interrupting your own scolding with a denial? Looks like someone's hiding something.>

"..."

<Oh well. I'm just calling in to ramble, anyway. Let me get to the point. The Eastern District is currently after the whereabouts of Yakumo Amagiri.>

"...Oh?"

<We've even got a witness. Another one of our execs.>

"..."

<Why so quiet? Even you know that Yakumo Amagiri is no mere urban legend. Or are you really hiding something?>



"...You've got us bugged, haven't you."

<Is that a yes?>

"Yakumo Amagiri... We've decided to set the volunteer police on his trail as well. But we're not going to kill him—we need to see if there's someone else behind his actions."

<Like the Eastern District, you mean?>

"Who knows?"

<I knew you'd say that. I'd also like to catch the guy alive, but things are turning out a lot like what happened with Nejiro. It's a bit of a mess.>

"...One of your executives just died. Aren't you *angry*? Or was the victim a useless pawn to you?"

<I make it a personal policy to keep my emotions and hobbies out of business. If not, I'd have killed Nejiro this summer.>

"Hey...have you ever hated someone enough to want to kill them?"

<No.>

"..."

<Anyway. You people westside don't really know how scary Yakumo Amagiri can be, do you? ...Consider this a tip.>

"You're sounding rather forceful for someone offering advice. But I'm listening."

<All right. Our Guard Team's faced him five times now—with practically every member available each time—and we still haven't managed to nab him. It's partly my fault for ordering them to bring him alive, but this Yakumo Amagiri is no joke, I can tell you that.>

"...As if I didn't already know this."

<He doesn't have an immortal body, he doesn't have telekinesis to deflect bullets, and he's not a master marksman. Although physically speaking, he has a perfectly balanced musculature and an excellent sense of rhythm.>

"Oh? I was certain he was a former mercenary or something of the sort."

<You see, there's something strange about Yakumo Amagiri.>

"That's quite obvious already."

<No, no, no. I don't mean it that way.>

"?"

<We did some research from our end. Did some digging into that past and identity he surprisingly tries to hide. And we noticed something fascinating.>

"Really?"

<You see, his brain...hm, how to explain? I don't think it's proper to compare everything to computers, but I guess you could say that he has a high clock rate. And he has some degree of control over that speed.>

"...Clock rate? What do you mean? That he thinks quickly?"

<'Thinks fast' doesn't even begin to describe it. I'm not saying that a killer with that characteristic happened to come to this island. I'm saying that that characteristic is what brought him to the island in the first place. I guess I can save that part for later. But either way, it's not a good idea to blindly oppose him. Especially not with bloodlust.>

"You think you can *convince* us to back down now?"

<No. Which is why I'm *warning* you. Why not at least call back your beloved boyfriend from Sado? I think your intel man's probably got that information already.>

"...I have no idea what you're talking about. If you're referring to Kugi, it's a misunderstanding. He's...simply a pawn."

<Heh heh heh...hah hah hah! A pawn for the organization? Or for your peace of mind—>

Click.



With a repugnant press of the button Yili ended the call and fell into bed, still in her *qipao*.

For a time her eyes were shut. But soon they opened for her to cast a complicated look at the ceiling, allowing her frailty to show.

It was a face she never showed the world. Yet even that was for a moment, as the mask of ice returned to her face.

But a second earlier, her voice had spoken.

That was the reason her face had frozen over.

“...Seiichi...”

Was his name on her lips a wish for his return, or his eternal departure?

Not even Yili knew which sentiment was the greater.



Chapter 3-A: Howl & Low

Aboveground, on the East-West boundary.

I'm standing between one ruined building and another.

The area is deserted, partly because it's far from the underground business centers. The abandoned buildings and construction materials only worsen the unfriendly air, which is second only to the Pits.

Not a good place for a nice chat with Miss Nazuna, then.

But in that sense, there's almost nowhere on this island with sweetness in the air. The casino, maybe, but if I went there I would turn her into an enemy again.

Wait. Now's not the time to be worrying about the atmosphere. First, I have to solve this misunderstanding.

What happens once we clear up the misunderstanding and we become close? It'd still be too soon to ask her out. But how to go from friend to boyfriend? ...How long do people usually hang out together before they start dating?

...It's not like I have zero dating experience.

Back in junior high, a girl in my grade asked me out, and we dated for about two years.

But we ended up drifting apart, partly because we went to different high schools. I remember being a high school student and seeing her in town, arm-in-arm with her new boyfriend. It felt complicated.

But this time...well, I'm the one in love with the girl. And...I've never wanted to know someone so much before.

I hope things turn out well.

It'll be okay. As long as I'm earnest about it, things will work out.

I had been repeating those thoughts in my head for about three hours when Miss Nazuna passes by the passage ahead. She probably doesn't notice me because I am standing in an alleyway.

When I hurry after her, she seems to hear my footsteps.

She stops in her tracks and provokes me.

"...What, did you bring a gun this time?"

...?

What is she saying? Is she confusing me for someone else?

Oh. She looks at my face and freezes. She must have been expecting someone else. But that tension in her eyes...I think she's on edge. Which is understandable, but that doesn't ease my sadness.

I decide to start with a friendly greeting to show that I am not hostile.

"Hey there."

Good. Perfectly natural.

I think that was a very natural greeting.

But for some reason, Miss Nazuna seems tense. She's clearly being cautious. But what does she know, really? Does she know that I helped her yesterday, instead of trying to kill her?

I don't have any intention of gloating over that, but it still makes me sad to be treated as her enemy.

...No. It's okay. I came to see her today so I could resolve this misunderstanding.

But anyway...yes. I finally ran into her.

Forcing myself to interrogate those people yesterday paid off. The two foreigners supposedly run a detective agency from a hotel in the Western District. I didn't know which hotel they were in, but I guessed that Miss

Nazuna would return to the Eastern District along this passage once she came to.

...Wait a second.

Doesn't that make me a stalker?

This isn't good. Should I tell her that this is a coincidence? But she'll see through that instantly. And then she'd *really* think I was a stalker.

Right. For now, honesty is the best option.

Fighting to resolve myself, I begin the conversation.

I can't freeze up now.

Relax, Yakumo. Relax. Freezing is an automatic fail.

Put on a relaxed smile and make friendly conversation. Smile, Yakumo. Smile.

I slowly release air from my lungs—

"I've been waiting. I knew you'd be passing this way. Bwah hah hah hah."

"Oh? You sound pretty confident. Are you thinking of taking me hostage to take down the Guard Team? I'll make you regret underestimating me."

Bloodlust rises to her eyes. Something's wrong. My plan is failing.

...This must be another misunderstanding. I think I might have picked the wrong laugh.

"W-wait wait wait! No! Stop. I...I don't really want to fight you."

"...Then what?"

What a relief. She's willing to listen to me. But she's got a knife in her right hand. Come to think of it, I saw her drawing it from her belt while I was talking. What a relief. I was worried she'd be caught unarmed by punks on the way. But with her skills, one knife should be enough to fight her way through.

But she still seems wary of me.

Calm down, Yakumo. Calm down.

What do I say this time? That's the important part.

...Wait, I have to give her something before that!

That was close. I almost forgot. I breathe a sigh of relief and pull out her katana from the bag I have slung behind me.

Anyone would recognize the blue scabbard on sight. The blade is slender for its length, and lightweight enough for a woman to wield with ease.

I hand her the sword, holding it by the scabbard. Surprised, she takes a step toward me.

"Oh! That's my sword!"

"I'm sorry. I...I was holding on to it. Yesterday, umm...when you were knocked out in the explosion, I picked it up because I thought it was important to you. But I ended up running away with it."

That's a lie.

Actually, I didn't *forget* to give the katana to the detectives.

I just wanted an excuse to meet Miss Nazuna.

I'm just confirming my own suspicions now, but I begin to feel even more like a piece of trash. I want to tell the truth, but I don't want her to hate me because of this.

As I wallow in my own guilt, she slightly lowers her guard and takes another step towards me.

"Then...you're the one who left me to the detectives after all."

"...Yeah."

I answer without thinking, but a part of me is overjoyed.

What a relief.

It looks like the foreign detectives told her about me.

Does Miss Nazuna understand now that I mean her no harm?

Little by little, I stop worrying.

We're talking to each other.

Why does having a conversation with her make me feel so happy?

"...Why? Why did you rescue me? And not just me—you never kill anyone from the Guard Team, even though we're enemies."

"Well...like I said to Zhang yesterday, I don't want to end up powering up the Guard Team by killing one of you."

"Then why did you rescue me from the explosion? Mr. Gen was the idiot who threw the grenade; you could have just avoided it alone."

Because I like you.

If only I could answer her honestly. But even I'm not that optimistic.

"You see...I..."

The answer I try to muster in my embarrassment is erased by a sudden noise and Miss Nazuna's scream.

There's a flash of red, and I see Miss Nazuna's face contort in pain.

I have no choice but to see.

"Ah...gyaah!"

"Miss Nazuna?!"

The noise was a gunshot.

As soon as I understand, blood sprays from Miss Nazuna's shoulder and splatters alien patterns on my face and clothes.

For a moment I am wracked by fear, but I force my confusion aside and focus my attention on her.

Blood spills from her upper left shoulder, but she had not been hit on the torso or a critical weak point.

The logical me restrains the emotional me from running to her.

'No. I have to take care of the gunman first.'

'Miss Nazuna is safe.'

'But if I don't find the enemy now, we're both done for.'

The emotional me is already screaming, but the logical me calmly takes over my body and my vision.

The next moment, a vulgar roar echoes across the deserted area.

"...Bitch...I'll kill you...I'll slaughter you!"

When I turn, I see a thug like any other on the island. Likely a hopeless creature who made trouble on the mainland and came to the island believing he could do anything here, cast out even from the mafia or the yakuza.

And for some reason, blood is dripping from a fresh cut on his forehead. He looks almost like a pro wrestler fighting to draw blood. But he doesn't look nearly as distinctive, and he certainly doesn't act like one.

They say to never judge a book by its cover, but considering his actions and the shotgun in his hands...what choice do I have?

For a moment, I assume he is the one who shot Miss Nazuna.

'Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.'

The emotional me cries for blood. But the logical me demands more time to understand the situation.

I consider killing him on the spot, but his shotgun is not smoking.

He has friends.

The moment I come to that conclusion, I turn back to Miss Nazuna.

Then I spot two more figures approaching behind her.

One has a small handgun trained on her.

The other is holding a knife, cautiously glaring from afar.

"You little slut...it's payback time!"

"...You bastards again..."

Nazuna addresses the thugs as she presses her hand to her shoulder. What a relief. It looks like it wasn't a critical injury.

"We're not letting our guard down this time, you little bitch. We'll chop off your hands and feet before we have our fun. And mommy ain't gonna come running to help you."

Miss Nazuna doesn't even seem to hear him. She glances at me and puts on a wry smile.

"Heh...looks like I let myself get too distracted by you."

No.

Does that mean she wouldn't have been hurt if I wasn't here?

Damn it. This is my fault. I was so caught up talking to Miss Nazuna that I didn't even notice these people coming. If only I'd been shot instead.

But before the expression on my face could even change, she takes back her own words.

"...Sorry. I didn't mean to use you as an excuse."

Oh.

The moment the words register in my head, something seems to run through my body.

No. My body? My heart? My brain? Or maybe my soul? Anyway, it feels like a current had run all the way through me.

They say love begins from the simplest of gestures, but this is worrying. I don't know what in those words has the power to affect me like this. It feels kind of like...like cogs suddenly snapping together.

Damn it...I can't let this happen now. Where's the romantic atmosphere?

I knew it. Everything I'd felt for her so far—it wasn't love. It was just a mistake based on the feelings of affection that grew in me as I watched her.

I understand that painfully well. Because...

Because, at this very moment, I am truly falling in love with her.

Interrupting that monumental moment, the man with the shotgun looks at me.

"You her boyfriend? Heh heh...you're not too bad. Looks like we can dress you up a bit before we give you both the treatment."

A sick pervert.

Just my luck. Why a sick pervert now, of all times?!

Oh no. Oh no. If Miss Nazuna thinks I'm gay, I'll never be able to convey my feelings to her. I think it's all right for all kinds of sexualities to exist in the world. At least, I don't want to discriminate. But forcing your sexuality on someone makes you a sick pervert, nothing more. In fact, the 'force' part is a crime in and of itself, sexuality notwithstanding.

This is bad.

And they've even got guns.

They might have killed a man or two on the mainland.

...Ah, okay. Let's just assume they did.

I tighten my grip on Miss Nazuna's sword and move in toward the shotgun man.

“Freeze!”

He yells something, but that doesn’t matter. I’m simply scattering his vision so stray bullets wouldn’t hit Miss Nazuna.

And at the end of that action,

The emotional me and the logical me come to an agreement.

‘It’s decided.’

‘I’m going to kill him.’

At that moment, I focus my every nerve on the act of taking his life.

My waking world distorts as the man becomes clear in my sights.

Then, time becomes heavy around my world.

“One more move—

“and” Oh, how to kill him. If I want to take out all my anger on him,

“I’ll” I can’t let him die quickly. But there’s no time. Cool my emotions.

“blow” If I spend too much time here, he’s going to shoot Miss Nazuna.

“out” The world feels like it’s slowed, but my movements haven’t accelerated.

“your” If only I had the power to stop time, like in those comic books.

“fucking” After all, even my body becomes slow and unwieldy just like the rest of the world.

“brains” But I’ve still got more than enough time to kill a lowlife like this one.

“you son of a biiiiiiiiiii...?! Rgh...AAAAAAAARGH!”

The man howls like an animal and rolls to the ground.

Blood spouts like a fountain from the back of his head. It's that clear he died instantly. I thought he'd fire off at least one shot from the impact, but I'm relieved to see his fingers had let go quickly.

It was simple.

I drew Miss Nazuna's sword and thrust it through his neck, then pulled it back out.

I took advantage of his confusion and moved as little as possible.

With my mind still focused on the world, I turn to the thugs closer to Miss Nazuna.

My mind is already there, but my body won't follow. I'm getting impatient.

By the time my eyes catch up, the man with the handgun is pointing it at me.

There is nothing to deduce.

He is the one.

The one who shot Miss Nazuna.

Noting that the gun is not aimed at her, I let my emotions take over.

"What the—

"fuck"	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill
--------	------	------	------	------	------	------

"did"	die	die	die	die	die	die
-------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

"you"	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill
-------	------	------	------	------	------	------

"pull"	die	die	die	die	die	die
--------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

"you"	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill
-------	------	------	------	------	------	------

"piece"	die	die	die	die	die	die
---------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

"of"	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill	kill
------	------	------	------	------	------	------

“shiiiiiiiiiiiiiii...? Agh...? Gah...ah...hah...!”

The katana I throw as I turn hits its mark, driving itself into his body. I’d never thrown a katana before, but I adjust my movements bit by bit in the sluggish time, referencing the sensation of throwing a knife.

Just one left.

My bare hands are enough against a knife.

I loosen my focus slightly and shift the speed from the frame advance function to slow motion. This is the best metaphor I can think of to describe the sensation, although my perception is what changes, not the world.

The last one must be confused by his friends dying so suddenly. Though I am unarmed, he runs off screaming with the knife in hand.

I consider chasing him down, but because I’m worried about Miss Nazuna’s wound I simply watch him disappear into the alley and stop, loosening the world from my focus.

The world quickly returns to normal speed, and the reality of Miss Nazuna before me floods my body.

“Oh...a-are you okay?”

Only then do I remember the body fallen by her and the katana stuck in it.

“Um...I, uh...I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to just use your sword like that...”

“Don’t worry. It’s a weapon; it’s supposed to get bloody all the time.” Miss Nazuna smiles, pulling the katana out of the corpse. “I thought I was used to seeing your skill, but you’re really something else. I guess...I guess I should thank you, first.”

“No...it was nothing.”

Even if I wasn’t here, she would have made it out with ease.

She couldn’t call herself a member of the Guard Team otherwise.

But when Miss Nazuna looks down at the handgun with the corpse beside her, and the shotgun by the other corpse, she becomes grim.

“Where in the world did they get these guns? ...Damn it. I hope we don’t get a repeat of what happened this summer.”

She’s mumbling to herself. Her shoulder is still bleeding, so I thought it might be best to stop the blood and disinfect the wound.

She must have noticed my gaze on her shoulder; Miss Nazuna slowly stands.

“Don’t worry. It didn’t hit any major arteries, and my bones and muscles are fine. It’s just a scratch. Really.”

“Yeah. You should see a doctor. Let me take you.” I say without any ulterior motive, but she lightly shakes her head.

“The nearest doctor would be the one at our office. But you’ll make a scene if you come along, whether you like it or not.”

With that, she gives me a smile.

My eyes might have made a mistake.

I might have been seeing things.

Thoughts like that occur to me then, but my brain—focused entirely on her and her alone—assures me that her smile is real.

Oh. My heart. It’s beating.

My pulse is all I can hear. It’s like it’s beating through my veins and straight into my brain.

“I’ll ask you about the details some other time. ...See you.”

She turns her gaze toward the Eastern District.

I’m floored by her strength, leaving two dead bodies behind as though nothing had happened. Although I have no right to say that, being the one who killed them.

At that moment, the emotion I had locked up inside suddenly escapes.

If she's not scared of me, even after seeing these corpses, maybe...just maybe—is what I might be thinking. Or maybe I just want her to acknowledge me. Even I don't know which.

I think it might be a mix of both emotions that compel me to ask the forbidden question.

"S-say..."

Stop.

Don't call out to her.

No. That wasn't it, Miss Nazuna. Please don't look back at me.

"...Do you think I'm abnormal? Do you...think I'm strange?"

There. I said it. What did I just say?

I don't want to hear her response. I don't want to.

But by the time I think to cover my ears, she had already given me a nonchalant answer.

An immediate reply.

"What, you didn't already know?"

...

...

...

I'm such an idiot.

That's why I tried to stop me.

I just had to acknowledge myself in my own heart.

I could have lost myself in the fantasy that maybe *she* would understand.

I know already. I know that any normal person would have answered that way.

I kept telling myself that I was normal because I knew. Even knowing the fact that I was the only one I could convince that way.

But I started to dream.

That maybe she would be different.

That maybe someone who was completely immersed in this island's air—someone like her, so calm in the face of death—might understand.

And my dream was shattered to bits.

And in only a minute since I truly fell in love with her.

I guess this is what it feels like when a man confesses to someone he's never met before and gets rejected.

So...maybe we're from different worlds after all.

Am I different from this world itself? Is that why I can see this world's time differently?

No...

If we're from different worlds...

If our souls can never truly come together...

If she can't be mine...

Then I'd rather—

Once more, I focus.



Yes. I'm normal.

People can go mad over jealousy and love.

Anyone can.

But they suppress it all with the mask of logic.

On this island, I wear the mask of Yakumo Amagiri. I look at the world through this mask, separate from logic.

So am I really normal, now that I've expressed everything but logical thought?

People who kill for logical reasons, fully intending to murder.

People who let their emotions take over, winding up taking lives.

Which one is truly insane?

And am I really normal for constantly debating this?

Of course I am.

I want to be acknowledged. Not by myself.

By even just one other person.

Someone. I want someone to acknowledge me.

Someone please answer me.

Am I...am I normal?

What...did I just do?

Was I...normal?

Someone...

Someone, please...

Chapter 3-B: And Then Who was Gone?

Underground, the Western District. The business district.

The underground business district was occupied by all sorts of shops, from jewelers to butchers.

Not even the previous day's explosion or the death of the executive could hold back the people's energy.

The pirate radio broadcast still blared from the speakers, the news about the Western District executive's death finally replaced by a drama CD.

"I hope he's a phantom thief."

"Huh?"

Melding into the lively crowds, Charlotte blurted out a non-sequitur.

"Then I could be the ace detective on his heels. Through our rivalry, our hearts connect...wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Charlotte...don't tell me you're talking about—"

"It's so very much like a phantom thief to descend from a pile of rubble with a lady in his arms, don't you agree?"

"...And there goes my sister past the point of no return..." Sherlock mumbled, cradling his head. He breathed a jealous sigh as he looked at the photograph from earlier.

When the siblings handed Yua a photocopy of the picture and asked for her help, she had replied, "I'll ask my friends". Afterwards, they had wandered aimlessly and questioned people in the area.

At Sherlock's suggestion they spoke to the volunteer police about the previous day's incident, but every last one of them refused to discuss the case. They provided no useful information.

As the siblings reached out to others for questioning, they happened to encounter a witness from the previous day and managed to get a decent account of the incident.

The group that had descended the rubble after the man in white was supposedly the Eastern District's Guard Team, and they had gotten into a fight with the volunteer police before knocking out several of them. It was finally clear why the volunteer police weren't keen to talk about the case.

"Charlotte. If the crazy gang back there was the Guard Team..."

"...Had Nazuna waited, she could have been treated on the spot by her teammates," Charlotte finished, though not quite in the way Sherlock wanted to take the conversation. But he did not cut her off.

"...Yeah, since she's a Guard Team member. Which means—"

"—that Nazuna is a very kind person!"

"Huh?"

"If not for our meddling, she would have been quickly found by her friends. But she wasn't at all angry with us this morning. She was being considerate of us. Therefore, Nazuna is very kind! Heh heh heh...the right guesses in the right places can easily lead us to a deduction, Sherlock Liverpool. Remember this well."

'...That wasn't even a deduction,' thought Sherlock, but his sister's innocent smile robbed him of his desire to retort.

"Anyway, judging from the circumstances, I think the Guard Team might have been after this character." He said, violently shaking the photograph. "But Nazuna Yukimura didn't say anything about him. Why do you think that is?"

"Maybe she didn't want to worry us?"

"...I'm almost jealous of you for answering that way without even thinking. Charlotte, when we go back to the mainland, don't ever listen to stories about Nigerian princes."

Imagining his sister obliviously beaming about being repaid by royalty, Sherlock found himself blushing.

'No. No! No no no no no no! Don't go there, Sherlock! She's your own sister!'

Slapping himself, Sherlock quickly returned to the topic at hand.

"Anyway, the Guard Team is chasing down the guy in this picture!"

"So he *is* a phantom thief!"

"How did you reach *that* conclusion? What I'm trying to say is, why do you think he saved Nazuna Yukimura of the Guard Team when she's part of the group hunting him down?"

"Hmm...maybe he's in love with her."

Charlotte's deduction was actually entirely correct, but Sherlock ignored her and sighed. Charlotte continued.

"...Oh...the moment we became friends, we also became rivals in love. What do I do, Sherlock Liverpool?!"

"Cool your head."

Though Sherlock looked nothing but tired, inside he was burning with jealousy toward the man in the photograph.

Until recently, Charlotte's declarations of love were reserved for celebrities, protagonists of hardboiled mystery fiction, or Little Grey (the protagonist of the Double Beretta movie series). Sherlock had never had the chance to feel this way before.

Though her supposed love was, again, toward a man she barely knew, the problem this time was that he was within arm's reach.

With the surge of jealousy, Sherlock also found himself thinking harder about what it was he really felt for Charlotte.

And whether she knew it or not, Charlotte put in more effort than ever toward solving this case.

Finally, about three hours since their investigation began, they found an answer of sorts.

It was in front of Iizuka's restaurant, when they were questioning people while waiting for Yua, that they encountered a certain man.

"Hm? ...I see. Same line of business here."

"Pardon?"

The shady man snorted when he saw the photo Sherlock held out.

"Looks like the poor client was on the end of his rope, asking kids like you for help."

"Oh? Are you a detective as well?"

"An *investigator*. Private office."

He was clearly looking down on them.

Sherlock acknowledged the jab, knowing that he and Charlotte barely qualified as detectives. And as for Charlotte, she seemed to be wholly ignorant of the man's condescension.

But the laughter suddenly drained from the man's face as he asked a strange question.

"Come to think of it...didn't you get the warning?"

"Warning?"

"What do you mean?"

The man looked back and forth between the confused siblings. Then something seemed to occur to him.

"Wait...or was that *your* doing? The voice definitely didn't sound Japanese... You're planning to take the reward for yourself, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Enough playing dumb! I know who you are. You're that lunatic, Spring-heeled Joplin!"

Sherlock sighed and shook his head. As for Charlotte, she smiled and said exactly what came to mind.

"Hah hah! Please don't tease us. Spring-heeled Joplin is just an urban legend."

"Don't mess with me!" The self-proclaimed investigator cried, nostrils flaring, and grabbed Sherlock by the collar. "I don't know where you're from, but there's no police around on this island. So lemme tell you what happens when you mess with—"

"Grown-ups?"

"Wha...? Agh!"

Behind the large investigator appeared an even larger figure that grabbed him by the collar and raised him into the air.

"Gah...urgh..."

The investigator grimaced as the collar of his shirt pressed painfully against his neck. And when the massive newcomer moved the second time, the investigator—who seemed to weigh at least 80 kilograms himself—was thrown backwards like a balloon.

There was a heavy thud against a wall, and the investigator's moaning stopped.

'*Souji Kuzuhara?*' Sherlock wondered at the size of the newcomer, but—

"Talk about a hassle." It was not Kuzuhara there cracking his neck, but a large man with his hair parted two-thirds of the way. "All right, then," he said, turning from the investigator to the siblings. "So you're Charlotte and Sherlock, eh?"

"I don't know who you're—"

"Yes, we are." Charlotte said, cutting off her brother.

"Good. Sorry to bust this on you, but we need you to come with us."

"Oh..."

They had come out of the frying pan and into the fire. The siblings looked around.

It was then they noticed an unusual girl standing behind the man.

Her eyes were veiled beneath her bangs, and there were what looked to be a pair of baseball bat cases slung behind her.

"We're very sorry. W-we just wanted to ask you a few questions. W-would you mind coming to the theme park in the Eastern District with us?"

The siblings tensed.

"Ch-Charlotte."

"...Don't worry, Sherlock Liverpool," Charlotte said encouragingly.

Before they knew it, the siblings were surrounded by a dozen men and women who seemed intent on taking them along.

"...What business do you have with us?" Charlotte said, sounding more grave than usual. The girl with hidden eyes gave an apologetic bow.

"We're very sorry. ...Umm...you know Nazuna Yukimura, yes?"

Charlotte said nothing.

"We asked around about a foreign man and woman...and everyone we talked to said it had to be you. We visited your office, but you were out. So...we were looking for you. You helped Nazuna Yukimura yesterday...right?"

Charlotte threw away all pretenses as the girl spoke nervously.

"Has something happened to her? Hasn't she gotten back to the Eastern District yet?"

The girl with bangs hung her head and uttered something terribly cruel—for both parties.

"We...we found her not long ago aboveground. And she was very badly hurt. I...I'm afraid that she's...she's currently comatose...and in critical condition."

As though pitying the siblings tossed along the wheel of fate—or mocking them—

A cat with a radio strapped on its back watched the scene from the shadows of a trash can.

The moment it mewled and began to leave, something like a whispered laugh escaped the radio.

Again, as though pitying—or mocking—the Liverpool siblings.



Once upon a time, there was an awkward boy and a naive girl.

The murderer boy tried to acknowledge himself,

And the detective girl tried to acknowledge others.

And with their respective goals, they begin to dance.

With their feet firmly on this decrepit island stage, nary an audience member in sight.

But there was a director.

He made others dance for his amusement, and when they failed him he denied all their efforts.

That very director was about to raise the curtains.



In the deep darkness, where only the light from a monitor shone.

As there was no heating to speak of, the chill of the winter sea sharpened the shadows in the room.

The man gazed upon the screen's futile struggle against the darkness and mumbled, disappointed.

"Ah...I warned rainbow-head, but it looks like he's come back after all. If only he'd stayed out of this...he wouldn't end up becoming my plaything on this island."

The man's sympathy, however, ran only skin deep.

A vicious smirk encroached upon his face and even his tone took a turn for the erratic, as though he had cast off a mask.

"Heh heh...ahahahahahahaha! Hahahahahahaha! Yes...I knew he'd come back. I was actually looking forward to it. Hah hah...excellent. It's almost turning out too well."

He produced an unusual gun from his pocket.

It seemed to be a normal revolver at first glance, but the barrel was blocked with iron—it would explode if someone tried to fire a bullet.

"I should declare war now. Give them a little warning. Or is it a little late for that?"

Humming to himself, the man twirled the gun in his hand and stared at the man on the screen.

The screen displayed an image from somewhere on the island. At the center left stood a man with seven-colored hair.

So striking was his appearance that he was clearly visible even in the tiny resolution.

Noting the rainbow-haired figure's presence, the man turned his back to the monitor and began to speak to the darkness.

"My revenge started so long ago."

He was speaking to no one but himself; a recital to remind himself of everything.

He had to remind himself that the things he'd done and the things he'd do were all completely justified.

But it was different from the way a certain Killer Ghoul talked to himself. This man was leading himself deeper into madness.

"For months and months...or years, maybe. Interesting. Heh heh heh heh heh heh...very interesting! Hahahahahahahahaha! Outrageous! Of course it's interesting; I'm the one who shaped this play! Heh heh heh heh! Ahahahahahahahahahahaha...hah...hah...hah..."

Reeling in laughter, the man in the dark raised his right hand high, gun and all, and promptly pulled the trigger as though signaling a marathon.

"Game start...or is it game over?"

At that moment,

"It's a new game for *me*..."

There was a distant sound of sparks, followed by tremors.

"And it's endgame for *you*, Souji Kuzuhara!"

The curtains finally rose.

The curtains over the whole island had been opened toward the audience-less sea.

Those of the island were all on the stage.

Those outside had no interest in the island.

And even if they did, the only way for them to observe the stage was by climbing onto it themselves. So the show began without a single audience member, only a twisted director who sat back and let the dominoes fall.

...Yes. There was no audience.

Everyone danced, like it or not, and showcased their true selves. That was all.

Then if nothing else, we shall be the audience.

We will watch them dance to the very end.

We are going to watch the island dance.

Whether or not it becomes the island's very last show—

Even if it ends with us all sinking to the depths.

After all, that is the fate of those who surpass reality and become legend.

間奏 4 (前)

『暗躍帰還』



Interlude 4 (Part 1): The Dark Night's Return

I wanted to be forgiven.

At least...I thought I did.

But I realized that that was a mistake.

So in my dreams, I let myself want forgiveness.

Even knowing it was futile, I sought what I wanted by escaping.



The young man was dreaming.

It was an uninteresting dream that recounted his past.

A dream, for that very reason, he could never escape.

Once upon a time, the boy had committed a sin.

With that sin still upon him, the boy became a man, and committed yet more sins to escape the first.

All the while, he saw his sins in his dreams.

Dreams of the childhood friend he killed as she cast the blame on him.

Dreams of escaping her voice by shooting her to death, again and again.

The dreams were more real than reality as they tightened like a noose around his heart.

After a certain incident, the young man had resolved to accept his past and left the artificial island to return to his hometown. He wanted to be punished for his crimes. He was desperate to find even a hint of salvation.

But the young man was never punished, and came to see the reality of the island he had inhabited.

He came to see how the events on the island were treated by the rest of the world.

When he turned himself in to the police, their question was simple.

“Where’s your proof?”

The young man who confessed to murdering his childhood friend, among many other things, received nothing but the label of ‘delusional’ in exchange.

As though everything that happened on the island had been a fantasy.

As though the artificial island did not even exist.

The real world had denied everything about the young man—even his sins.

Shattered, the young man began wandering in search of his friend’s family.

Supposedly they had moved away the very year he went to the island—so he went from place to place, running after their trail.

As though that would be enough to redeem him of his sins.

Finally, he arrived at the family’s home.

He pressed the recently-installed doorbell and waited. And waited.

To beg forgiveness.

Or to die. To be punished.

The true nightmare was waiting for him inside.

And because he knew that, the young man waited...and waited...for the door to open.

To move on from his past.

Or to accept his past.

But what awaited inside was—



Then, he opened his eyes.

Though he had only just awoke, the young man with shadows cast around him knew that he was in reality.

In other words, he knew that his dreams had just come to an end.

They were lucid dreams, but the young man chose to let them unfold the way they did in his memories.

Perhaps he saw no point in resisting the past. Or perhaps he wanted to overcome it.

But he opened his eyes just before the critical moment.

Perhaps his waking at that point was a coincidence—but the young man did not think so.

'I ran away. I couldn't even bear my own dreams...and escaped into reality.'

He remembered clearly what was beyond that door—what awaited him inside.

Though he despised himself, the young man did not even have the strength to chastise himself.

The lethargic air around him was interrupted then, by an energetic voice.

"We're just about there, son."

The voice belonged to a man in early middle-age. The young man slowly rose.

When the waves shook his foundations, the young man remembered that he was on a boat.

"...Thank you."

The stars were already twinkling in the sky; the winter constellations shone ominously into his heart.

The older man, who seemed to be a fisherman, chuckled in an attempt to dispel the darkness.

"I used this route how many times now? ...Anyway, the missus runs a restaurant over yonder westside, if you're fixin' to get some food in there. Ain't no one who don't know Iizuka's restaurant."

"I see...I'll have to drop by sometime."

With that, the young man climbed down to the lower level of the island's outer wall.

He said goodbye to the fisherman once more and silently began to climb the long ladder upwards.

With each step, he remembered the many things that waited above.

Most were memories he wanted to forget, but could not bring himself to.

Memories of people. Things. And his own crimes. They all tightened like chains around him.

But each time his memories threatened to suffocate him, he found himself relieved.

Finally, the young man returned to the island.

To the island he never needed to come back to.

To the island he never should have come back to.

How long had he been staring out at the sea?

Behind him stood all the buildings from before, just as he remembered them.

Remnants of his dreams—symbols of the world he had once inhabited.

Lacking the courage to face them, he stood for hours at the wall with his eyes on the water.

Or perhaps he was recalling the events that had taken place just before he left the island.

He scrutinized the waves for several more minutes, but he still did not find the courage to turn.

If only something—anything—would give him a push.

And the moment that weakness surfaced, the cell phone in his pocket vibrated and dragged him out of the past, back to reality.

He stared at the screen—'Caller Unknown'—and slowly brought it to his ear.

As though he was afraid.

Or as though he was expecting something.

First came the voice.

<Hey there.>

A nostalgic voice that shook his very soul.

<It's been a while...Seiichi Kugi.>

"...Inui!"

"<That piracy offer's still on the table if you're interested.>"

The voice on the phone and the voice in his ears overlapped.

Having experienced this before, the young man slowly turned to the voice with his phone pressed to his ear.

A gust passed over the island, and as though carried on that wind—

The rainbow-haired man appeared.

There was a moment of silence.

Another gust of wind passed them by.

And at that moment, a deafening noise shook the island and one of the buildings near the center of the city began to spew flames and smoke.

Even from a distance it lit up the faces of the two men, casting mirrored shadows on their faces.

And though the island filled with memories was on fire, the dogs Seiichi Kugi and Hayato Inui did not break their gaze.

Only the seabound wind passed through, as though nothing had ever happened.

As though proving that there was no mirror between the dogs.

The dogs who came to the island on the same day,

And left on the same day.

They were back.

On the same day, at the same place.

Did their instincts lead them back to the island?

Or were they led back to one another like fate?

The island burned brightly like a torch.

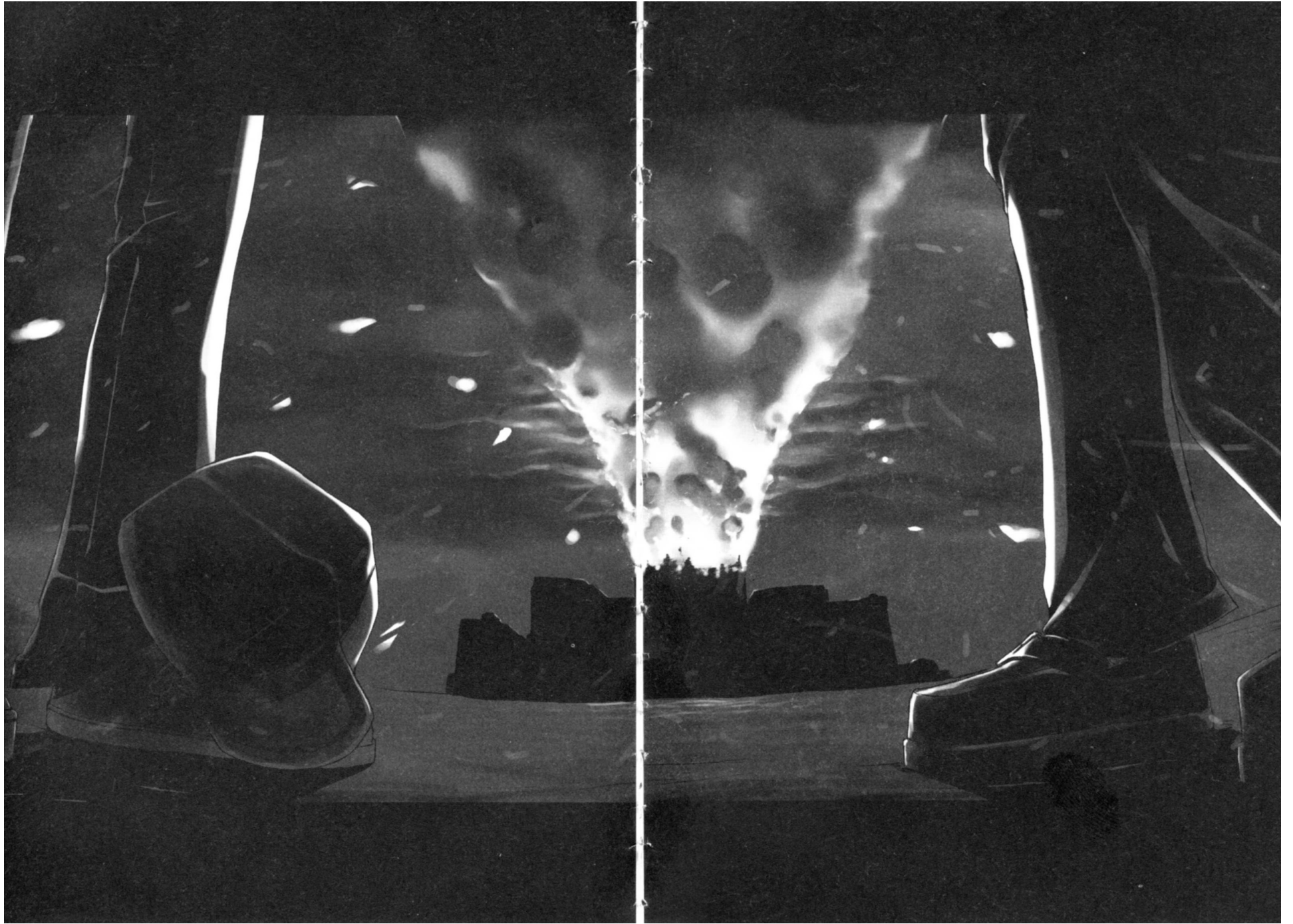
As though mocking the returning dogs.

Or blessing their return.

The flames billowed, punctuated by small explosions.

Like the growling of a wounded beast.

Resounding far, far into the air.





「ソシテ——狂ッタヨウニ踊ル犬達ヲ前ニ、

TO BE

【 G i r l &



少女ト怪物ハ何ヲ叫ブノカ——」

G h o u l ! 〈 下 〉 】



They, and the island,
Could only know their own existence by howling.

And as the dogs dance madly,
What do the girl and the ghoul cry out?

-To be continued in Garuguru! Part 2-

Afterword (Part 1)

Hello everyone, this is Narita.

This is the third and final arc in the Etsusa Bridge series, following Bow Wow! and Mew Mew!.

In other words, if you read those two volumes first, you'll be happy and I'll be happy. We'll all be happy together.

As the promotional materials advertised, this is the first part of the final arc of the Etsusa Bridge series.

Other than Etsusa Bridge, I'm currently working on four other series with Dengeki Bunko. Baccano!, Durarara!!, Vamp!, and Hariyama-san, Center of the World. This will be the first time that I end a series.

But really, by that I simply mean the main plot centering on Kuzuhara and the cat and dogs is coming to an end. I might very well write more on the events that take place on the bridge. If it comes down to it, please just think of Etsusa Bridge as a long-running series like Friday the 13th. That way I can minimize the awkwardness when I end up writing something after the final volume. So in conclusion, please don't concern yourself too much—sit back and enjoy the final arc.

...

What if the island explodes in the next volume?

I certainly hope that won't happen, but who knows?

I haven't written the next part as of this moment, so it's really up to me what happens in the next book.

But in any case, please look forward to Garuguru! Part 2!

Now, the music Kelly had blaring all over the island in this volume comes from a totally-100% mysterious group known as Bouyokudan. They're a band that's also releasing music on a regular basis, so I unilaterally decided to advertise for them.

I took my profile photo with five of the members, and as you can see, they are a hyper-aggressive Yanki artist group from Chiba!

Their album 'THAT's BOUYOKUDANTAINMENT' is set for release on December 7 (2005), and if all goes to plan it'll have been released by the time you are reading this book. It's their magnum opus, filled to the brim with upbeat tunes and aggressive lyrics! It's a must-listen for all fans of the Etsusa Bridge and Durarara!! series. You'll get a first-hand feel for what it feels like to be around Kelly, and it also works as a great theme song for the Dollars!

I've heard it said that if this album sells well, they'll be able to take another leap forward onto a whole new level. Please let this happen! Use me as a stepping stone if necessary!

No, I'm definitely not saying they'll advertise for me once they get really popular. Not yet, anyway...

I got to thinking that it might be really profitable to find sponsors and use my afterwords to advertise, but I decided not to because the editorial department might get mad. It would be really bad if my books didn't sell well enough and I had to pay the sponsors instead! Call me a coward.

I'm running out of things to write because this is part 1 of 2. But I'm obligated to write at least four pages for formatting reasons.

All right. I'll pad things out with a behind-the-scenes story.

Mr. Yasuda's incredible color page illustrations struck me with inspiration the moment I set eyes on them, and I wound up creating more characters. Some new players will be joining the fray in the next volume! Like Lilei or Lilei or Lilei.

As usual, below are some words of thanks.

I'd like to thank editor-in-chief Mr. Suzuki and Mr. Wada from the editorial department, for whom I always cause nothing but trouble.

I'm grateful to the proofreaders and designers, the managing department, the publicity department, the publishing department, and everyone at Media

Works, for making this book presentable even as I constantly miss my deadlines.

I'd also like to thank my family, friends, and acquaintances, and everyone from S city.

I'm grateful to Bouyokudan for giving me material to write about in the afterword, and Brother T for setting me up with them. I'd also like to thank the passing used bookstore owner for taking the photo of us.

To all the Dengeki writers and illustrators for all their help and support.

To Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, who pours heart and soul into the illustrations, even for characters I didn't give specific instructions for. (Again, congratulations on the manga serialization!)

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers. Each and every fan of the Etsusa Bridge series.

I'm so grateful to you all.

November 2005, at home
Reflecting on the irony of a professional author thanking a used bookstore owner

Ryohgo Narita

Chapter Titles (Part 1)

Hello, everyone. This is the translator. As you have likely noticed, the chapter titles in this volume of the Etsusa Bridge series (and the next) are puns on common phrases and movie/book titles that I localized for the purposes of this translation. Below are the changes (if any) I made to each one.

Note: In what will be a recurring pun in this arc, the character for wolf (*rō*) often replaces a homophone or a similar sound from the original phrase.

Prologue A: Wolf in Hollow Clothing

Original title: 机上の空狼 (*kijō no kōrō* lit. 'the empty wolf on the desk'.)

Original reference: 机上の空論 (*kijō no kōron*, lit. 'empty theory on the desk'), an expression which refers to something that only works in theory.

My reference: 'Wolf in sheep's clothing'.

Prologue B: Enter the Great Louse Detective

Original title: 軽探偵登場 (*keitantei tōjō* lit. 'the light(weight) detective appears'.)

Original reference: 名探偵登場 (*Meitantei Tōjō*, lit. 'the great detective appears'), the Japanese title of the 1976 film 'Murder by Death'.

My reference: 'The Great Mouse Detective' (1986 film).

Interlude 1: Every Dog has his Unlucky Day

Original title: 犬も歩けば不幸に当たる (*inu mo arukeba fukō ni ataru* lit. 'even a dog can get unlucky as it walks'.)

Original reference: 犬も歩けば棒に当たる (*inu mo arukeba bō ni ataru*, lit. 'even a dog can get clubbed as it walks'), a Japanese proverb which seems to have two meanings. 1: No matter what you do, tragedy will befall you. 2: You may be surprised by a bout of good fortune.

My reference: 'Every dog has his day'.

Chapter 1-A: The Wolfman and the Sea

Original title: 狼人と海 (*rōjin to umi* lit. 'the wolfman and the sea')

Original reference: 老人と海 (*rōjin to umi*), the directly translated Japanese title of 'The Old Man and the Sea' by Hemingway.

My reference: Direct translation.

Chapter 1-B: A Detective Short Story

Original title: 暫定物語 (*zantei monogatari* lit. 'temporary story'.)

Original Reference: 探偵物語 (*Tantei Monogatari*, lit. 'a detective story'), a 1979 TV drama starring the legendary Japanese actor Yūsaku Matsuda.

My reference: None.

Interlude 2: One Man's Trash is His Mistake

Original title: クズ過誤 (*kuzu kago* lit. 'Kuzu's big mistake'.)

Original reference: クズ籠 (*kuzu kago*), meaning 'wastebasket'.

My reference: 'One man's trash is another's treasure'.

Chapter 2-A: Paw and Circumstance

Original title: 威風狼々 (*ifūrōrō* lit. 'dignified wolf (x2)').

Original reference: 威風堂々 (*ifūdōdō*), the Japanese title for the Pomp and Circumstance Marches by Sir Edward Elgar.

My reference: None.

Chapter 2-B: Armchair Defective

Original title: 墮落椅子探偵 (*daraku isu tantei* lit. 'fallen chair detective'.)

Original reference: 安楽椅子探偵 (*anraku isu tantei* lit. 'armchair detective'.)

My reference: None.

Interlude 3: The Good Demoness of the West

Original title: 西の善き鬼女 (*nishi no yoki kijo* lit. 'the good demoness of the west'.)

Original reference: 西の好き魔女 (*nishi no yoki majo*), a series of novels by Noriko Ogiwara. Translated directly as 'The Good Witch of the West' for English releases.

My reference: Direct translation.

Chapter 3-A: Howl & Low

Original title: HIGH & 狼 (high & *rō* lit. 'high & wolf'.)

Original reference: Unsure. The English phrase 'high and low'?

My reference: None.

Chapter 3-B: And Then Who was Gone?

Original title: そして誰がなくなった? (*soshite dare ga nakunatta?* lit. 'and then who was gone?'.)

Original reference: そして誰もなくなった (*soshite dare mo nakunatta*), the directly translated Japanese title of 'And Then There Were None', a novel by Agatha Christie.

My reference: Direct translation.

Interlude 4 (Part 1): The Dark Night's Return

Original title: 暗躍帰還 (*an'yaku kikan* lit. 'a dark night's leaping return'.)

Original reference: 暗夜行路 (*an'ya kōro*), a novel by Shiga Naoya serialized between 1921 and 1937. Translated directly as 'A Dark Night's Passing' for English releases.

My reference: I was going for a direct (but streamlined) translation, but the title ended up sounding like a Batman reference. No complaints!



9784840232333



1920193005707

ISBN4-8402-3233-4

C0193 ¥570E

 **MediaWorks**

発行●メディアワークス

定価: 本体**570円**

※消費税が別に加算されます

